"I was a High Priestess": Stevie Nicks stars in our Flashback interview

Core values: Apple's revamped smart HomePod speaker

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **501**

May 2023

ROOM ROCKERS

GROUP TEST

Six great mid-priced standmounts face off in our speaker special

NEWS SPECIAL:
Launches from Klipsch, FiiO, Fyne Audio, Castle, Elipson, Pantheone, Melco and more...

BUYING GUIDE
100+ Essential Components
p109

SUPER STACK
Musical Fidelity's flagship Nu-Vista PRE/PAS amps

DVOŘÁK ON DRIVE TIME
The exquisite art of the classical DJ

Beginner's Guide
How to achieve amp and speaker synergy

"IT'S GOT THE LOT"
Astell&Kern's Acro CA1000T DAC/DAP/amp combo

WOODEN WONDER

ELAC's stunning Miracord 80 belt-drive vinyl spinner

SOME GREAT REWARD

We salute the electronic genius of Depeche Mode

SO LONG SEPARATES!

AVM's Inspiration AS 2.3 all-in-one amp is a classic

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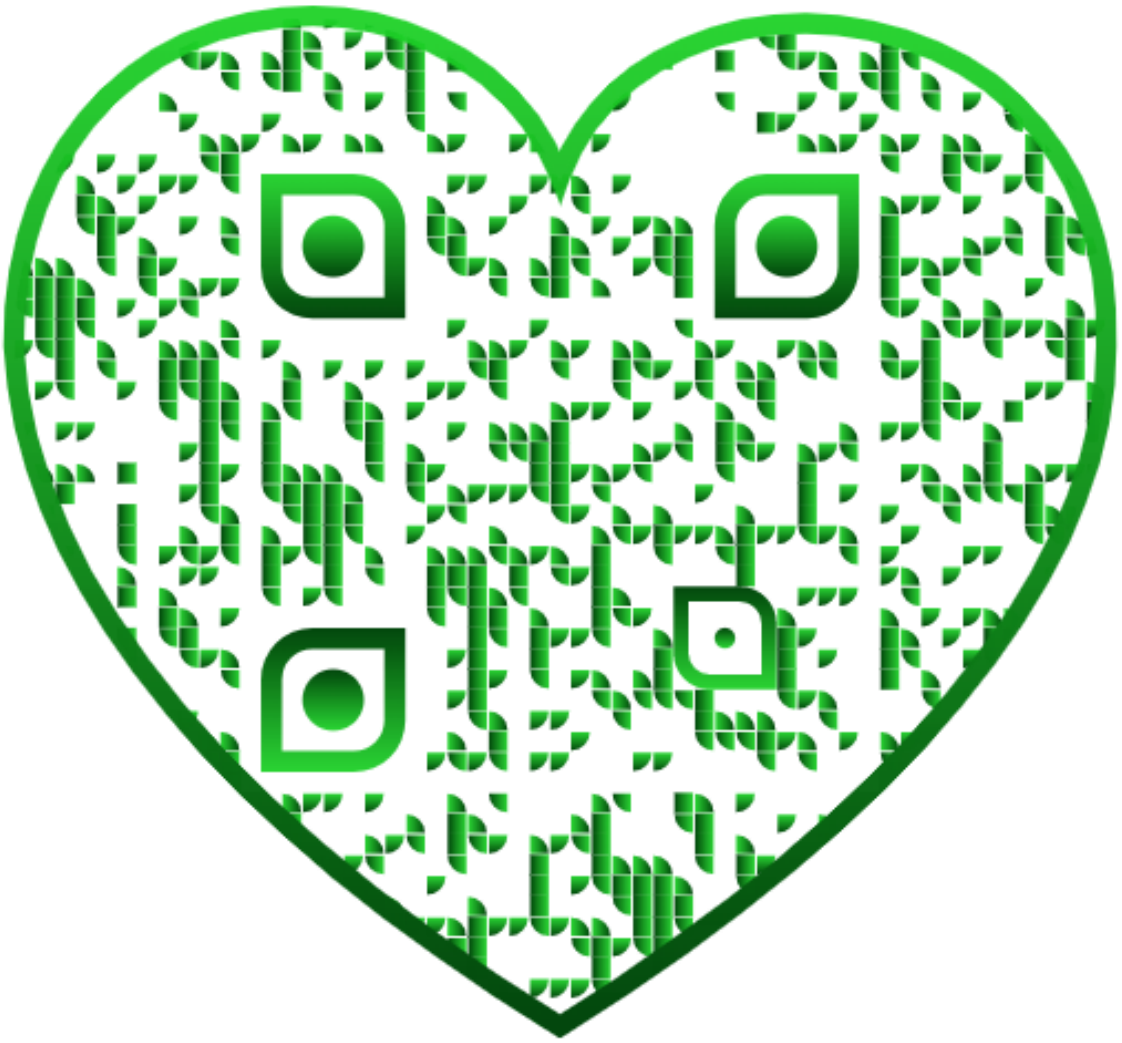

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Welcome

hifichoice.com Issue No. 501 May 2023

42
Musical Fidelity
Nu-Vista PRE, PAS & PSUs

56
Creek
4040 A

Musicreviews

87
Music Reviews
Tinariwen

Picture credit: Marie Planeille (Tinariwen)

BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE: Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance

RECOMMENDED: Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance

GROUP TEST WINNER: Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!

There's this excellent book by Talking Heads' David Byrne called *How Music Works* which, in part, explains that the way music has been made down the centuries is directly influenced by how it's being received by the listener. For instance, back in the jazz era trumpets were the foremost instrument because they could be easily heard through the speakers above the chatter in a nightclub while today there's a vogue for whispered, intimate vocals *à la* Billie Eilish as we are increasingly inclined to enjoy music in our own private space via headphones.

There's much more fascinating stuff about this in next month's issue, but right now it got me thinking about how most of us listen in multiple ways: at home via speakers, on the move through our cans *etc*. Just as well, then, that the copy of *HFC* you're holding has got the lot. From a *Group Test* of affordable standmount loudspeakers to info on a new set of in-ears from Letshuoer, we've got all your listening preferences covered.

There's also an appreciation of synth pioneers Depeche Mode in our *Legends* feature, a journey to Good Vibes record store in Leith and a *Beginner's Guide* to how to achieve synergy between your amp and speakers. In other words, something for everyone.

Enjoy!

Steve Sutherland Editor

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Hi-Fi Choice

Contents

hifichoice.com Issue No. 501 May 2023

BUYING GUIDE
100+ essential components
p109

NEWS & OPINION

6 Audiofile
The latest news on the hottest products from the world of hi-fi coming your way

67 Letters
Put your points of view and queries on audio matters to our team of experts

79 Opinion
The *Hi-Fi Choice* team say it as they see it as they discuss the issues of the day

87 Music Reviews
The month's essential new CD, vinyl and hi-res releases given a work out

READER SERVICES

76 Beginner's Guide
The art of system matching explained

108 Back Issues
Missed a copy of *HFC*? Look no further

109 Buying Guide
Our hottest hi-fi component picks

122 Reader Classifieds
Sell your unwanted hi-fi for FREE here

130 Next Issue
The sonic treats to look out for next month

FEATURES

62 Destination: Leith
A record store with a taste of Californian cool in the heart of Edinburgh

96 Music Legends
From sugary pop to drug-addled stadium fillers, Depeche Mode have seen it all

126 Flashback
The year is 1989 and Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks is promoting a new solo LP...

128 Reasons To Be Cheerful
Our pick of the most exciting things coming your way this month

GROUP TEST

26
Six seriously special standmount speakers are put through their paces

Flashback: Stevie Nicks

Audiofile: Klipsch The Nines & The Sevens

Music Legends: Depeche Mode

CONTENTS
MAY 2023

48
Astell&Kern Acro CA1000T

"Remember: power rating does not give a direct indication of how much sound the speaker will generate with a given amplifier – sensitivity is a better yardstick for this"

Beginner's Guide – Component Synergy p76

TESTED THIS MONTH

42
Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista PRE/PAS & PSUs

52
AVM Inspiration AS 2.3

56
Creek 4040 A

46
ELAC Miracord 80 Turntable

REVIEWS
Kit testing

42 Musical Fidelity
Nu-Vista PRE, PAS and PSUs pre/power amplifier and power supplies (*Exotica*)

46 ELAC
Miracord 80 Turntable belt-drive vinyl spinner

48 Astell&Kern
Acro CA1000T desktop/portable/ DAP/DAC amp

50 Bowers & Wilkins
705 S3 two-way standmount loudspeaker

52 AVM
Inspiration AS 2.3 all-in-one integrated amplifier

56 Creek
4040 A integrated amplifier

58 Apple
HomePod (2nd generation) smart speaker

CHOICE EXTRAS

104 Chord Company
Clearway Power cable

104 Black Rhodium
Intro XLR stereo interconnect

GROUP TEST
Standmount loudspeakers £2,400-£3,500

28 ATC SCM19

30 Falcon Acoustics M10

32 Mission 770

34 Neat Majistra

36 Paradigm Founder 40B

38 Revival Audio Atalante 3

58
Apple HomePod

104
Chord Co Clearway Power

Picture credit: Shutterstock/Ivica Drusany (Depeche Mode)

Never miss an issue – turn to p102 for our latest subs offer

Audiofile

THE LATEST INDUSTRY NEWS...

Your number's up

Two new wireless speakers from the US

PRICE: £1,500-£1,850 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** KLIPSCH.COM HENLEYAUDIO.CO.UK

AMERICAN COMPANY KLIPSCH has announced the UK release of The Nines and The Sevens – two new powered speakers which join The Fives in its Heritage Wireless series. Featuring real-wood veneers and built-in amplifiers, the company says the speakers are: "extremely versatile, easy to set up and use, and connect to virtually everything – including TVs via HDMI ARC". They include an integrated phono preamp, Bluetooth wireless connectivity, digital optical, analogue RCA and USB inputs plus a subwoofer out. The bi-amping design has been incorporated in a bid to improve clarity and output, and the powered monitors feature compatibility with PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz.

Klipsch The Nines and The Sevens feature 25mm titanium tweeters on the company's Tractrix horns. Larger in size and output, The Nines, with 240W total system power, employ an all-new 203mm long-throw high excursion composite cone bass driver, while the mid-sized The Sevens, with 200W total system power, use a 165mm long-throw bass driver for: "enhanced bass". All speakers are available in walnut or black.

Connect more

Klipsch The Nines and The Sevens powered monitors are compatible with the Klipsch Connect App, allowing users to customise EQ and subwoofer volume settings, dynamic bass, night listening mode, over-the-air firmware upgrades and a digital quick-start guide. Klipsch The Nines measures 241 x 486 x 340mm (WxHxD), weighs 12.8kg and is priced at £1,850. The Sevens is 206 x 416 x 276mm, weighs 10.12kg and is priced at £1,500.

French Connection

A brace of new beetle-inspired speakers

PRICE: £895-£1,650 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** REVIVALAUDIO.FR

FRENCH LOUDSPEAKER SPECIALIST Revival Audio has launched two new additions to its Sprint range: the Sprint 3 standmount and Sprint 4 floorstander.

Both models feature an 'Elytron' baffle design, which the company says is based upon the internal organic structural layout of a beetle carapace. "This lightweight, high-strength material has been designed with a unique asymmetric shape that allows Sprint to deliver very accurate dispersion of high frequencies by effectively guiding the sound wave as it leaves the speaker," Revival explains. "It also optimises the mid and low frequencies by reducing the diffraction impact from the speaker cabinet, while minimising the impact from different listening environments."

The Sprint 3 is a two-way bookshelf speaker featuring a 28mm RASC soft-dome tweeter with built-in ARID (Anti Reflection Inner Dome) patented technology along with a specialised back-chamber design, which the company claims is able to: "absorb 95+ percent resonances". It also boasts a lightweight, rigid BSC (Basalt Sandwich Construction) 178mm bass driver. The Revival Audio Sprint 3 is complimented by the Revival Audio Stand 3, which is sold separately. Claimed sensitivity is 87dB into 6ohm loads.

The Sprint 4 is a 2.5-way floorstander featuring many of the same assets as the 3. Revival adds that: "The 2.5-way crossover design on the Sprint 4 maximises the performance of its two 178mm BSC woofers, resulting in a more accurate phase and extended low frequency". The Sprint 4 comes with foot-spikes to provide further stability, absorb vibration and enhance sound imaging.

The Sprint 3 measures 213 x 380 x 307mm (WxHxD), weighs 9.1kg and is priced at £895 per pair. The stand costs an additional £340. The Sprint 4 measures 213 x 1,060 x 307mm (WxHxD), weighs 20.6kg and is priced at £1,650 per pair. It has a claimed sensitivity of 89dB with 4ohm nominal impedance.

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Bang for your buck

A brace of new B&O Beosounds

PRICE: £2,650-£2,900 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** BANG-OLUFSEN.COM

BANG & OLUFSEN has launched its new generation Beosound A9 and Beosound 2 speakers. They're on the Mozart software platform – a futureproofed module, frontloaded with the processing power to receive software updates. The company says that: "If the connectivity and streaming technology ever becomes obsolete, the module can be replaced with the latest version – providing great sound experiences for decades to come".

The Beosound A9 was originally launched in 2012 with its famous circular-shaped design. This is the 5th-generation iteration and comes with a new set of standard finishes – Black Anthracite, Gold Tone and Natural Aluminium – plus oak legs and aluminium hardware finishes.

Featuring built-in Class D amplification (1x 400W for bass, 2x 200W midrange, 2x 200W for full-range and 2x 150W treble), it also boasts a 46mm bass driver, a pair of 76mm midrange drivers, two 19mm tweeters and a brace of 38mm full-range drivers.

Volume can be controlled by sliding your hand across its surface, and with a tap on the A9 you can skip, play or pause listening instantly. It's priced at £2,900.

The updated Beosound 2 is the 3rd-generation of a model originally launched in 2016. A unique-looking multi-room speaker, it is crafted from high-grade aluminium and comes with the same colour choices as the A9. Also sporting Class D amplification – in the shape of 15W for the tweeter, 2x 15W for the midrange and 2x 30W for the bass driver – it's said to feature an improved user interface and benefits from the addition of Active Room Compensation, meaning Beosound 2 can detect its position in any space and distribute sound accordingly. Priced at £2,650, it has a single 19mm tweeter, a brace of 51mm midrange drivers and a single 133mm bass driver.

The hound of music

New headphone amp/DAC from China

PRICE: £700 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** FIIO.COM

FIIO HAS JUST launched its flagship K9 Pro ESS balanced hi-res desktop headphone amplifier/DAC. It features dual ES9038 Pro digital-to-analogue converters, dual THX AAA 788+ amp technology, multiple inputs/outputs and Bluetooth 5.0 with support for a range of codecs including aptX HD and LDAC. It comes with MQA support; native playback of audio files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256 and boasts the ability to effortlessly drive headphones featuring an impedance of 16-600ohm.

Expanding upon the connections offered by its earlier K7, the K9 Pro ESS features a wide selection of audio input options, including: RCA, coaxial, optical, USB-B, USB-C and balanced 4.4mm. From an audio output perspective – alongside the 6.35mm single-ended, 4.4mm balanced and 4-pin balanced XLR headphone connections – it also features RCA and balanced 3-pin XLR outs.

In addition, Low, Medium and High hardware gain levels can be manually selected from the front panel.

The PCB has been designed with a partitioned layout so that the power-supply is kept separate from any audio signals while analogue and digital audio are also isolated to ensure the integrity of the signals being processed. Throughout its balanced six-stage audio circuit, signals from the left and right channels are also processed independently in a bid to further reduce crosstalk.

Featuring Qualcomm's QC5124 Bluetooth chip, the Bluetooth 5.0 connection supports AAC, SBC, aptX HD and aptX Adaptive.

Fyne and dandy

A big 'un and a little 'un from Scotland

PRICE: £3,750-£30,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** FYNEAUDIO.COM

FYNE AUDIO HAS introduced two new models in its retro-styled Vintage series: the Vintage Fifteen and Vintage Five. The flagship Fifteen hosts what Fyne claims is: "the most ambitious and dynamic IsoFlare driver to date". This point source transducer system employs a 380mm multi-fibre cone mid/bass driver with Fyne's premium 75mm titanium dome, neodymium motor compression tweeter. Fed from Fyne's highest spec and Deep Cryogenically Treated crossover, the company says the Vintage Fifteen: "delivers music with the precision and scale of a full orchestra".

The cabinet is hand built from birch plywood and finished in the finest oiled walnut veneers with solid burred walnut inlays and gold anodised metalwork. The twin-cavity enclosure is mathematically contoured in a bid to reduce standing waves and ported downwards onto Fyne's largest BassTrax LF diffuser system to date. This creates uniform 360° bass energy dispersion into the room, reducing room-position sensitivity and allowing the 380mm driver to move the largest volume of air without port turbulence.

Luxury goods

Each 93kg cabinet has been crafted with a number of luxury design touches from the analogue dial Presence and Energy controls for room tuning, to the retro-texture grille material and natural walnut patterns unique to every cabinet. With a claimed 97dB/W sensitivity (8ohm), 800W peak power handling and bass down to 22Hz, the Vintage Fifteen will set you back £30,000.

The Vintage Five is a micro model boasting Fyne's smallest IsoFlare driver to date. It combines a 125mm multi-fibre cone mid/bass driver with FyneFlute surround and a 19mm magnesium dome HF compression driver with neodymium motor system.

The IsoFlare driver is built into a cast aluminium chassis to eliminate vibration colouration and incorporates Fyne's flux focusing magnet to increase bass sensitivity of the small surface area mid/bass section.

The Vintage Five also features its own hand-build, Deep Cryogenically Treated crossover, Van den Hul-matched crystal silver plated OFC internal wiring and integrated presence control dial for fine room integration. It has claimed sensitivity of 87dB and nominal impedance of 8ohm.

Like the Fifteen, its cabinet is crafted from birch ply and hand finished in oiled walnut veneer and burr walnut inlays. Details include anodised gold trim, a leather grille tab and a microsized implementation of Fyne BassTrax LF diffuser technology. It's priced at £3,750.

Let's go pro!

New deep space blue in-ears

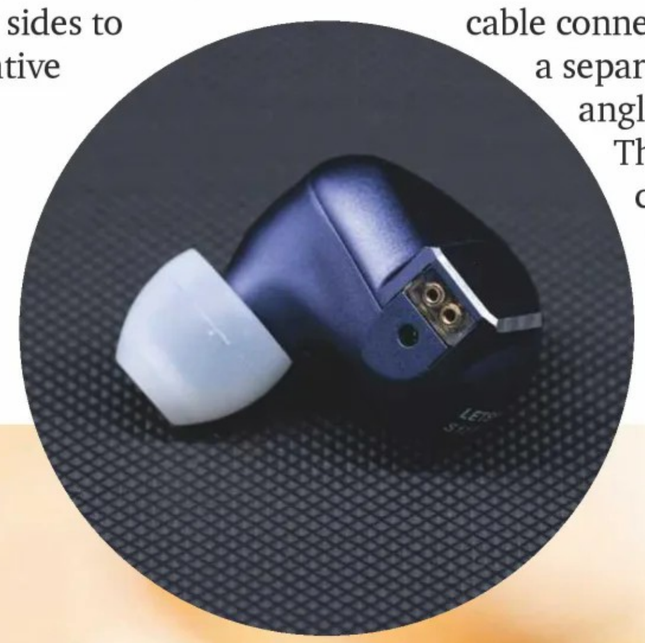
PRICE: £170 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** LETSHUOER.NET

CHINESE EARPHONE SPECIALIST Letshuoer has unveiled its S12 Pro in-ear model featuring a custom 14.8mm planar magnetic driver. With a claimed sensitivity of 102dB, it has been built using a five-axis machining process. The smooth aluminium chassis has been designed with a comfortable fit in mind and features multiple vents on both sides to help alleviate any negative pressure build up in the ear canal that can sometimes be experienced when wearing IEMs for extended periods.

In addition, the company explains that: "the minimalist profile of the S12 Pro chassis – together with an independent rear acoustic chamber – minimises unwanted reverberation to produce a natural, open soundstage."

In a bid to further ensure unwanted distortion is avoided, the S12 Pro's dual-pin cable connectors have been tooled as a separate element of the chassis, angled away from the faceplate. The supplied cable is constructed from silver-plated monocrystalline copper and comprises four 98-strand cores, woven together, for a total of 392 separate strands. Detachable from the S12 Pro via the standard 0.78mm dual pin connectors, the source-end of the cable features a modular design, which allows the user to swap out a number of various jack-types to suit whatever source equipment is being listened to. Also provided are 2.5mm balanced, 3.5mm single-ended and 4.4mm balanced modular connectors.

The S12 Pro comes in deep space blue accompanied by the aforementioned connectors plus three foam tips, three black silicon ear tips, three white silicone ear tips (all small, medium and large) and a leatherette carrying case.



Royal flush

Castle's aristocratic standmounts

PRICE: £3,850-£4,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: CASTLE.UK.COM

BRITISH SPEAKER MANUFACTURER
Castle has introduced two new models – the Windsor Earl and Windsor Duke, which join the company's Richmond, Avon and Knights cabinets, released in 2010.

Both models feature mid/bass cones made from a polypropylene-based material of which Castle says: "Instead of being produced by simply forming a foil under a vacuum, the polypropylene is precision-cut into thin strips, woven back into a sort of fabric, and bonded together again to form a solid foil. This foil is pressed into the final shape and cut to size... This helps to minimise resonances, which produces a flatter response curve."

The cones – 165mm in the Windsor Earl and 200m in the Windsor Duke – feature surrounds fashioned from low-hysteresis rubber, which Castle claims will not deteriorate over time and the magnet system includes an aluminium compensation ring to minimise impedance variation.

Windsor castle

The treble driver in both models features a high-consistency exposed polyester dome, with a pressure-equalised ferrite magnet system and metal front plate. No ferrofluid is used, in a bid to guarantee the highest possible dynamic range. The 28mm treble voice coil is equipped with a copper cap on the pole piece of the magnet, to reduce distortion and intermodulation.

Both Windsor models utilise a 4th order LKR (Linkwitz-Riley) crossover with inductors of the 'air core' type, preventing hysteresis or distortion through the network. Sensitivity is quoted at 89dB (8ohm) for the Earl and 90dB (8ohm) for the Duke.

The main cabinet structure uses dual-layer MDF panels separated by a thin flexible layer of acoustic glue specially developed to dampen resonance in the critical midrange frequency region. Point-to-point bracing is applied for optimum rigidity. Finishes include a choice of walnut or mahogany veneers and each speaker is hand-finished with mirrored, sealed and waxed book-matched veneers.

The Castle Windsor Earl will set you back £3,850 and the Windsor Duke £4,500. Both can be purchased with a pair of dedicated, open-frame stands, costing an extra £400 for the Earl and £500 for the Duke.

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Way out west

Flash new import from the US

PRICE: £17,000-£18,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** WESTERNELECTRIC.COM ABSOLUTESOUNDS.COM

READERS WITH DEEP pockets and good ears have cause to celebrate as Western Electric, America's oldest audio company, arrives in the UK via Absolute Sounds. One of the first products available is the 91E valve amplifier, made in Rossville, Georgia.

The company says: "The 91E evokes the golden age of American manufacturing with its unique design and exemplary build quality. The amp is visually arresting, with its colour display and pair of matched 300B valves housed in glass cylinders. Available in a choice of champagne gold, nickel and black, its finish is immaculate, and its controls impeccably engineered."

The 91E features Western Electric's patented, fully linear SCCS (Steered Constant Current Source) circuitry, which is controlled exclusively by the valve's output voltage and, the company claims, increases the power available from the 300B output valves to around double the 7-8W of traditional 300B-based SET amp designs – while eliminating the need for large output transformers and associated hysteresis.

Spirit of 1914

When the amp powers up, the LCD display shows Western Electric's Spirit Of Communication logo, designed back in 1914, then switches to a pair of vertical power meters. Volume level is displayed, alongside input selection: there are the four line-level RCA inputs, an MM/MC phono in and Bluetooth. Other features include microprocessor-controlled valve warm-up and auto-bias regimes, an optical-encoder volume control that addresses a relay-switched resistor network and the switching of filament polarity each time the amp is turned on to enhance the 300Bs' lifespan.

The 91E's complement of valves includes a pair of ECC81s in addition to the matched pair of 300Bs. The company explains that: "While the amp's power output is lower than that of solid-state designs, the additional power generated by its innovative design opens up a wider range of partnering speakers while elevating the amp's sonic qualities. Flexibility is further enhanced by plug-in-plug-out 4, 8 and 16ohm transformer blocks, interchangeable to match the speakers used."

The Western Electric 91E integrated amplifier is priced at £17,000 in black or champagne gold, or £18,500 in the premium nickel finish.

Parisian deities

New affordable speaker range from France

PRICE: £225-£750 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** EN.ELIPSON.COM AVOKE.CO.UK

ELIPSON HAS LAUNCHED its Horus range of loudspeakers featuring a bookshelf, floorstander, centre and subwoofer with a consistent acoustic signature based around a driver design that features paper and glass fibre, in conjunction with a silk dome neodymium tweeter.

The compact Horus 6B bookshelf speaker is designed to be flexible in the home as a music-only, stereo solution for small rooms through to complementing a well-balanced multi-channel setup for music and movies. It has a 25mm silk dome tweeter partnered with a 127mm glass/paper fibre mid/bass driver for a claimed sensitivity of 87dB (8ohm). It measures 175 x 340 x 270mm (WxHxD), weighs 5kg and is priced at £300.

The Horus 11F is a 2.5-way floorstander, which pairs up the same tweeter with two 127mm mid/bass drivers and forward-firing bass ports with a view to positioning and aesthetic installations being achieved with minimum disruption. Sensitivity is quoted as 90dB (8ohm), dimensions are 175 x 875 x 270mm (WxHxD), it weighs 13kg and is priced at £750 per pair.

The Horus 8S compact active subwoofer features a 203mm drive unit powered by a Class D amplifier capable of a quoted 300W output and has DSP control. It measures 280 x 280 x 280mm (WxHxD), weighs 11kg and is priced at £450.

The Horus range is available in Black/Carbon, Light Wood/ Beige and Walnut/Dark Grey finishes. ▶

SAMSUNG

HOUSE

Wizard from Oz

New smart speaker from Sydney

PRICE: £1,200 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: PANTHEONEAUDIO.COM

PANTHEONE AUDIO, AN Australian design firm that: "focuses on creating beautifully designed pieces of art and décor that also serve as state-of-the-art sound systems," has introduced its Obsidian smart speaker, aid to be inspired by the organic, lava rock of the same name.

Obsidian supports casting protocols such as Apple AirPlay 2, GoogleCast, Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect and more, and is designed to retrofit into any legacy audio system, thanks to a full suite of digital and analogue outputs.

Connectivity includes dual-band wi-fi, an Ethernet port, and stereo analogue, optical and coaxial digital outputs. Under the hood is a premium differential DAC design based on Texas Instruments' PCM5141 converter, with support for 24-bit/192kHz music files. Roon subscribers can stream audio to the CS1 from their personal libraries and online services supported by Roon in hi-res. ▶

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S7t, Hi Fi News, April 2022

"Like its S7t sibling, it excels when it comes to mid and high details, resolving the most subtle of musical moments and nailing the feel and tone of instruments...It all sounded wonderfully three-dimensional."

S4b, Hi Fi News, June 2022

"For those who like to close their eyes during listening, the R7ts are heaven sent. Put another way: as Knopfler's Schecter Strat gave way to the piano toward the track's end, I started to well up. It really was that good."

R7t, Hi Fi News August 2022

"Perlisten brings exceptional levels of detail and nuance to movies and music, underpinned by rock-solid lows. Lush looks and outstanding build quality make this series even more of a winner."

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More in store

New flagship music library from Japan

PRICE: £12,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** MELCO-AUDIO.COM

JAPANESE MUSIC STORAGE specialist Melco has launched the N1-S38, its latest flagship SSD-based digital music library. The design is based around a new platform, with updated chassis, casework and power supply, which Melco describes as offering a: "previously unreached performance level".

A full-width design, the N1-S38 benefits from improved electronics, mainboard, mains transformer, supply and local regulators. An audio-specific custom 3.84TB SSD drive, which benefits from Melco's proprietary layered, rigid SSD mounter, is directly connected to the data path without any intervening RAID controller; on-board memory is increased, too.

Key to the updated look is Melco's all-new casework, which benefits from highly stable chassis construction centred around a robust 3mm stainless steel base plate to minimise unwanted vibration. Externally, it is complemented by precision-machined two-tone aluminium casework on the remaining five faces, ranging in thickness from 2 to 5mm.

Light show

The front panel features Melco's positive-click fascia control buttons – which are now illuminated – a crystal-clear OLED display panel, plus a USB port and new teal LED lighting. The N1-S38's low-slung steel base plate design and subsequent low-centre-of-gravity chassis construction have been designed to prevent unwanted resonance from interfering with the music signal.

Die-cast Amphenol USB ports are provided for the rear-mounted digital-to-analogue converter, Expansion, Import and Backup ports, for improved performance and durability with heavier-grade premium cables and connectors.

The dedicated Player port for direct connection to network players is enhanced by precision Neutrik RJ45 connectors; the LAN port is similarly upgraded. The N1-S38 also benefits from an SFP for direct fibre connection to a suitably equipped player or network infrastructure. It also supports a switchable 10MHz external clock input – a first for one of the company's music libraries.

The newly developed high-capacity power transformer is mounted on its own sub-chassis and exceeds that of the existing flagship N10/2. This is complemented by a bespoke device for the capacitor bank.

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How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most methodical test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening carried out by experts

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS GROUP TEST

EVERY *HFC* SPEAKER *Group Test* begins with levelling the playing field. This means we have to ensure that each product is properly run-in. All speakers are therefore given 24 hours on an IsoTek Test and Burn-In CD and played in the background for a few days in our reference setup.

Before the comparative listening starts, each speaker is carefully positioned in the listening room. This varies depending on the model; the infinite baffle ATC SCM19 is happy pushed back against the rear boundary wall, whereas the reflex ported Mission 770 works best over 30cm out. Some rear-ported speakers, such as the Revival Audio Atalante 3, come with foam bungs that can be fitted or left out depending on room acoustics. Auditioning is done in both configurations in such cases.

Although some manufacturers supply bespoke stands, the main comparative listening is done on our own reference supports – either 16 or 24in high. In some cases, toe-in is applied to get the best stereo imaging. When everything is set up, listening commences with the carefully chosen music selection. One test track from four musical genres is used – *The Rain Song* for dynamic, expansive classic rock, *Reach Out* for uptempo electronica, *Primitive Painters* for jangly, layered indie-pop and *Night Nurse* for gut-thumping reggae. Other music is also played over a week or so on all the speakers.

TEST MUSIC

LED ZEPPELIN
The Rain Song
IV

MANIX
Reach Out
Stupid Dope Mix

FELT
Primitive Painters
Ignite The Seven Cannons

GREGORY ISAACS
Night Nurse
Night Nurse

REFERENCE SYSTEM

CD TRANSPORT:
Cyrus CD Xt Signature **£1,900** ***HFC* 386**

This remains one of the best sensibly priced, modern silver disc transports around – and a fine provider of digits for this *Group Test*. Its bespoke, in-house developed mech delivers a detailed and revealing sound when fed into a high-quality DAC.

DAC:
Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 **£5,000**
***HFC* 468**

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AMPLIFICATION:
Exposure 3510 pre/power **£3,180**

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STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS £2,400-£3,500

Stand out

Nick Tate auditions six seriously special standmount speakers

YOUR FIRST PROPER separates system is always going to delight. But what about your next upgrade, when it's time to move from a good budget system into what's called 'mid-fi'? Suddenly there's a big, wide world out there of upgrades to be made, with higher stakes as you're spending more money.

The six standmount speakers on test this month are the sort of products that many buyers will likely shortlist. You'll be moving from your entry-level bookshelf speakers to something that delivers substantially more insight into both the recording and the overall emotion of the music.

Yet as the quality improves, so does the variety on offer. You begin to see quite different solutions to the question of reproducing music – sometimes using fundamentally different approaches in acoustic design. This is interesting in itself, as there's no single 'perfect' way of making a mid-price standmount speaker – if there was, everyone would be doing it the same way!

Just to make things more confusing, at this price point (and above), buyers need to be crystal clear about what they actually need. Do you want a pin-sharp, ultra-revealing sound for classical music or a big banger that thumps out copious amounts of low frequencies for techno, drum and bass or reggae? Or maybe a good working compromise? Getting this clear in your mind is just as important as what you put on your audition shortlist – as you don't want to be sampling speakers that simply don't match your tastes and/or requirements.

This may be a bit confusing, but the upside is that – as this roundup shows – mid-price standmount speakers have never been better. You can get seriously good sound from all of these on test here, with some snapping at the heels of designs costing twice the price. ▶

ON TEST

ATC SCM19 £2,400 p28
This long-established UK company's professional monitor heritage is easy to spot in this largish design with its super-solid build. ATC's bespoke drivers, infinite baffle loading and excellent finish seal the deal.

Falcon Acoustics M10 £2,400 p30
From the UK company famous for its superbly remanufactured classic KEF drive units, comes this compact mini monitor. It uses the legendary KEF B110 mid/bass driver, plus a SEAS tweeter made to Falcon's specification.

Mission 770 £3,500 p32
Based on Mission's classic late-Seventies 770. It takes engineering and styling cues from the original, but with modern manufacturing and build techniques. The result is a striking-looking standmount that promises a great deal.

Neat Majistra £3,500 p34
One of the most radical products in an already interesting group, this compact British speaker has an exotic ribbon tweeter allied to isobaric mid/bass drivers. It looks and sounds distinctively different to all its peers.

Paradigm Founder 40B £2,400 p36
This veteran Canadian company's profile is on the rise after creator Scott Bagby's return. The speaker's name reflects precisely this point – and it's a thoroughly engineered little thing!

Revival Audio Atalante 3 £2,400 p38
This medium-sized two-way from France is the baby of this new start up, which proudly boasts that it's designed and manufactured in-house. Styling-wise it has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, but what about the sound?

ATC SCM19 £2,400

Steeping from the studio into a more domestic setting, can the pro specialist work its magic in the real world?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ATC SCM19

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way infinite baffle standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
17.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
265 x 438 x 300mm

FEATURES
- 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 150mm mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 85dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC

ATC is a purveyor of professional monitor systems to recording studios and live venues, and a prolific drive unit manufacturer of nearly 50 years standing. For much of this period, it has also offered a range of domestic hi-fi speakers and these have garnered a cult following. The SCM19 you see here is the company's take on a mid-price, mid-size domestic standmount and is characteristically quirky.

The first thing that strikes any keen observer is that it's the only speaker here with a sealed cabinet – in other words, it's a closed-box with no bass reflex port. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. Closed – so-called 'infinite baffle' designs – tend to have faster, tauter bass with less bottom-end boom. Reflex-ported designs are said to be easier to drive with superior bass extension given the same size cabinet and sensitivity.

ATC is famous for making its own drivers, and here has fitted its 25mm SH25-76 tweeter, which is a soft dome type. This crosses over to a long-throw 150mm mid/bass unit with a heavy magnet system and slightly sticky doped fabric cone. The crossover features metalised polypropylene capacitors, large air cored inductors and ceramic wire-round resistors.

The super-sturdy 19-litre cabinet is one of the heaviest here; braced, laminated and curved at the back, it sports excellent real cherry or black ash finishes done to a very high standard. ATC claims a sensitivity figure of 85dB, making it one of the least efficient in the group, so a beefy solid-state amp is needed for it to give of its best. Thanks in no small part to its closed-box design, the SCM19 proves surprisingly easy to position, requiring a sturdy stand and placement close to a rear boundary wall, with a little bit of toe-in.

Sound quality

The SCM19 sets a high early bar for the group, across all types of music played. Its key positive characteristic is musical enjoyment; it has a deft knack of digging into the recording, whatever it may be, and then eking out the rhythmic aspects, as well as conveying dynamics impressively. This means that, with programme material that majors on these two facets of sound reproduction, it works very well indeed.

It really sings with songs such as *Night Nurse* by Gregory Isaacs. This reggae relies on a hypnotic groove courtesy of legends Sly and Robbie on bass guitar and drums; the timing is superb on this track and the SCM19 tells you so in no uncertain terms. Its infectious, lilting sensation is really well done. Ditto Manix's *Reach Out*; there's a sense of power and force from the electronic beats that's just fabulous to hear.

Tonally it's not quite as pure as some in the group; there's a slight opacity to female vocals, for example. This is only a subtle sensation, but it's fractionally more nasal than clear speakers like the Neat Majistra. Nor

This is the only speaker in the group with a sealed cabinet, so no bass port

do the lyrics to Led Zep's *The Rain Song* quite have the purity they deserve – yet it's still a great sound because you become immersed in the brooding power of the track and its thumping crescendos. Felt's *Primitive Painters* is carried exceptionally, with the ATC majoring on the emotional impact of the song, but it doesn't cut through the dense and slightly muddy mix as deftly as the Paradigm or Neat offerings.

The SCM19 images impressively, serving up a big, expansive sound – partly helped by its excellent, tight but powerful bass performance that's class leading; it brings real thump with very little overhang. Yet it can't match the pin-point precision of some here. Overall, a great rock and pop speaker if you like raising the roof ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★☆☆
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Rock-solid; tight and punchy sound

DISLIKE: Slight opacity to midband

WE SAY: A super engaging and great fun standmount

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Falcon Acoustics
M10 £2,400

Playing a major part in the classic BBC LS3/5a speaker from the Seventies, can Falcon still lead the way?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Falcon Acoustics M10

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way bass reflex standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
185 x 316 x 260mm

FEATURES
- 25mm soft dome tweeter
- 127mm mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Falcon Acoustics

What goes around, comes around. That's the experience of Falcon Acoustics, a thriving UK loudspeaker driver manufacturer notable for its excellent re-engineered KEF units from the Seventies, such as the B110 and B139. Its success comes from the quality and attention to detail of its work, and so it was only a matter of time before it started doing its own designs.

The M10 isn't significantly different in both size and styling to Falcon's own licensed BBC LS3/5a monitors, and shares the same legendary B110 mid/bass driver. But that's where the similarities end, as the cabinet is a wee bit bigger and also reflex loaded. The tweeter is a SEAS product made to Falcon's own spec. The company's design department features a former long-term employee of ProAc, so there's an interesting mixture of design DNA going on here.

This standmount looks unashamedly old school, albeit not in the vein of the 'cor blimey' retro styling of the Mission – more Rover P6 than Ford Capri S, you might say. Its beautifully veneered cabinet is produced in the same Italian factory as the Falcon Gold Badge LS3/5a (*HFC* 470), and is available in a choice of natural Walnut or Rosewood finishes. Round the back is the aforementioned bass reflex port, plus a pair of 4mm nickel-plated binding posts.

The result is a svelte, luxurious-feeling, classically styled mini monitor that is exceptionally easy to set up and get the most out of in an average room. I discover that it works best slightly toed-in, 15cm out from my boundary wall. While it's not too dissimilar to the LS3/5a in some respects, it's way more efficient (86dB/2.83V/m) so will go much louder per watt of power fed into it. It's also a fairly easy load too, so almost all modern amps should be able to comfortably drive it.

Sound quality

Given that this is such a small speaker by the standards of the group, my eyes give me the impression that it will make less of an impact than some others here. My ears, however, do not agree! This is quite TARDIS-like in its presentation, in as much as the size of the recorded acoustic it recreates doesn't reflect the size of the cabinet itself. The M10 is best described as a mini monitor that hasn't got the memo. Unlike most small speakers it has an expansive and feisty sound, one that really relishes making music. Yet it doesn't overpower a small room in the way that the ATC or Mission might – making it better suited for more compact rooms.

The M10 is fun and friendly, whatever the type of music you play. It dives into the groove with a puppy-dog enthusiasm. It's slightly warm in the upper bass, but not in a bad way. Instead, this adds a wee bit of 'grunt' to its character which in part makes it sound bigger than it is. It's best with relatively simple, rhythmic music like the Gregory Isaacs track, where it has a ball. It

The M10 is a mini monitor that hasn't got the memo about its diminutive size

can't provide the motive force of the others here, but instead gives a nicely nuanced rendition that has a lovely, intimate vocal sound. You'll end up getting into the phrasing and enjoying how it syncopates with the fabulous rhythm section. Also, the classic analogue synthesiser sounds very well textured – you can really feel the 'squelch' from its glittering harmonics.

Treble isn't as good as the Neat offering – nothing else in the group is – but it's still very able and this gives a lovely, delicate tactile quality to the hi-hat cymbals in the Felt track. Vocals on this indie recording can sound a touch brittle at times – both male and female – but interestingly don't here. Yet still they are clear and delicately carried throughout. Overall, a great-sounding small speaker ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Fluid, engaging sound; tonal warmth

DISLIKE: Limited power handling

WE SAY: Super baby box that's lots of fun

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Mission 770 £3,500

Based on a design dating all the way back to the days of Concorde's first flight, can this old master still cut it?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Mission 770

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way bass reflex standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
19.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
300 x 590 x 322mm

FEATURES
- 28mm soft dome tweeter
- 200mm mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
International Audio Group

Back in 1976, British speakers were more conservative than now. Most were variations on the BBC theme: voiced to offer a pleasant, impartial and genteel sound perfect for light music and classical. Then Mission arrived on the scene with the original 770, which was a far faster and more engaging listen – with styling to match.

This new 770 keeps many elements of the original design such as the polypropylene mid/bass driver. This version retains polyprop for the cone material, but gets mineral loading for added stiffness. The original's 200m diameter mid/bass driver was regarded as compact, but by today's standmount standards is very big. A 28mm woven textile soft dome tweeter completes the package.

The wide front baffle may look unconventional now, but designer Peter Comeau says this is the correct approach – adding that today's narrow baffle cabs are compromised by the need to follow fashion. The big 38.5-litre internal volume let him tune it for very extended bass alongside decent sensitivity. A more complex multi-element crossover than the original is used, with audiophile-grade components.

Mission's parent company normally builds everything in China, but the 770 is made in the UK with the cabinet sourced from Timberworx near Sheffield. Finish is much better than the original and it's easily the heaviest here. The big Mission looks very attractive in a retro way, with a choice of walnut or black real-wood veneers to the high-density MDF cabinet walls; the front baffle is white laminate. Setup is easy; most amps can drive it loud; at least 50cm of space from the boundary wall is needed.

Sound quality

The 770 is the largest speaker here by quite some way and sounds it. Yet it's much more than a typical retro-styled 'big banger'; instead of the boom-tizz one might expect, the Mission delivers a surprisingly nuanced sound that's very musically involving and just a little bit euphonic. It doesn't set out to be a thumping beast, yet nor is it super forensic and fussy; rather it treads a very well-judged middle line that will endear it both to fans of classic speakers and to those who want a modern-sounding design with something just a little special. Its character is more modern than it looks, yet in some ways it's better than most contemporary designs because it doesn't take on their compromises.

It works very well across musical genres, especially rock. It relishes tracks like Led Zep's *The Rain Song*, proving well able to convey its power and glory – better even than the ATC, in most respects. This is down to its larger-than-usual bass driver and the extra headroom it affords, along with its big reflex-ported cabinet that's able to move vast amounts of air around the room. There's no sense of the music being 'shrunk in the wash' like many small-footprint modern standmounts in the group; instead it

The Mission 770 is so much more than a typical retro-styled 'big banger' speaker

delivers a huge visceral punch on the song's crescendos.

The 770 images very well too, partly because of its sheer physical size – although depth perspective isn't quite as good as the Falcon or Revival Audio. Certainly, from left to right, it is able to push really wide and high – doing great justice to the blistering electronica of the Manix track. Bass is strong and has seemingly vast reserves, although not as taut as the ATC, but the midband is the real surprise. It proves really good on vocals and although not super revealing, has a certain fluidity and delicacy that's very satisfying. Cleverly, it manages to be highly revealing without getting analytical. To my ears, this is a seriously special speaker at the price ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful yet sophisticated sound

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Charismatic retro charmer

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Neat
Majistra £3,500

Combining elements of Neat's Ministra and Prestige Ultimatum XLS, can the Majistra better its siblings?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Neat Majistra

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way isobaric bass reflex standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
11kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 380 x 290mm

FEATURES
- 60mm true ribbon tweeter
- 2x 170mm mid/bass drivers
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Neat Acoustics

Two years ago, this speaker's baby brother – the Ministra (*HFC* 465) – did extremely well in our standmount *Group Test*. Now it's time for the next model up the range to be put through its paces. In the words of designer Bob Surgeoner: "there is essentially no design difference between the two except size". The Majistra boasts eight more litres of cabinet volume and three extra kilos of weigh over its smaller sibling in an effort to improve efficiency and bass extension. When all is said and done, there is no substitute for cabinet volume when you want to move air around the room.

No other speaker in this group sports isobaric cabinet loading; indeed it's very rare full stop. Surgeoner explains that this configuration: "makes the drive units behave as if they're housed in a cabinet of much larger internal volume." The mid/bass drivers – one on the front baffle and the other inside the speaker – are now 170mm to the Ministra's 134mm. The 60mm true ribbon tweeter is this speaker's other *pièce de résistance*. It has super-fast transient response thanks to its ultra-light diaphragm, which has a lower moving mass than any conventional dome tweeter – plastic, cloth, silk or metal. A high-quality crossover divides up the drivers.

The exterior paint finish on our review sample is very good and the whole cabinet feels solid with its well-damped 18mm-thick MDF walls; nice real-wood veneer is also offered. The result is a speaker with a very wide claimed frequency response, one that goes down to 25Hz (no cut-off point specified) with a sensitivity figure of 88dB. The latter might not be anything to write home about, but most modern solid-state amps shouldn't have a problem with it. Placement proves to be easy, with controlled bass from as close as 30cm from the rear wall.

Sound quality

Given this speaker's relatively complex design, the Majistra is actually an exceptionally gifted loudspeaker at this price. Its greatest strength is its all-round excellence; indeed it will surprise anyone who thinks they know what a small-to-mid sized floorstander can and can't do.

First thing's first, this Neat offering is able to conjure up the best treble performance of the group by a fair distance; its ribbon tweeter makes the ride cymbals on the Felt track sound soaring and ethereal.

On Gregory Isaacs' *Night Nurse*, the hi-hats are deliciously delicate and defined. This also impacts the midband, giving acoustic instruments and vocals a crystalline glint complete with sparkling harmonics. The piano work, for example, on the Led Zep cut is a pleasure to behold. It also has ramifications for the stereo imaging too; this speaker offers a great, out-of-the-box sound that hovers in space. Again, it's up there with the best of the rest in this respect – like the Paradigm.

Exceptionally gifted at the price, Majistra's biggest strength is its all-round excellence

Then there's bass performance, which is superb. The Majistra pulls off an amazing trick of being able to sound bigger and less strained at high volumes than you'd expect given the cabinet's dimensions. On really powerful low-end transients, such as with the sub-bass on the Manix track, there's less hint of compression and/or unease at high listening levels than all here except perhaps the Mission 770. Even the ATC SCM19 with its professional heritage doesn't quite pull this off. Yet the ATC does have a tighter, tauter and less lumpy bass; there's definitely a slight 'sweet spot' in the upper bass, which is the only blot on an otherwise spotless copy book. Overall, this is an extremely accomplished performer – and state-of-the-art at its price ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★½

LIKE: Punch; clarity; supreme musicality

DISLIKE: Lacks ultimate bass grip

WE SAY: Superb all-rounder, from bottom to top

OVERALL ★★★★★

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Paradigm
Founder 40B £2,400

Released to celebrate Paradigm's fourth decade in the biz, is this aptly named standmount fit for a party?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Paradigm Founder 40B

ORIGIN
Canada

TYPE
2-way bass reflex standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
11.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
197 x 368 x 320mm

FEATURES
- 25mm ceramic dome tweeter
- 152mm mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 89dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Pulse Cinemas

Life begins at 40, apparently. Canadian speaker specialist Paradigm is now past the big four-o, and undergoing something of a resurgence. It's never made great inroads into the crowded and sometimes parochial UK market, but if the new Founder series can't put the brand on the map in Britain, I'm not sure what can. Scott Bagby, the company's original co-founder, sold this brand a while back and then recently took back control. The name of this series alludes to this fact – the boss is back!

The unusually dimensioned Founder 40B is even better looking in the flesh than in photos; suffice to say it's a very purposeful and focused-looking design, with no empty real estate on the front baffle. This means the designer has crammed the largest mid/bass driver into the cabinet that they can. A classic two-way, bass reflex design, the tweeter sports an exotic 25mm magnesium/aluminium dome with a 135mm 'oblate spherical waveguide'. The patented 152mm mid/bass driver shares the same so-called AL-MAG material as the tweeter, albeit in cone guise, with a new type of roll surround.

It's said to have a very long throw for its size and is specially decoupled from the moderately sized internally braced cabinet, which is home made in the Toronto factory. The mid/bass unit is vented through quite a large reflex port at the rear of the cabinet. Speaking of the latter, this is angled and tapered – presumably to break up internal standing waves. Overall build and finish is very good indeed. If the quoted sensitivity of 89dB (-2dB) is to be believed, this goes loudest of all designs here for a given amount of power. Placement is easy; it works well 30cm out from a boundary wall, and likes being toed-in slightly.

Sound quality

One of the most charismatic performers in the group, this has a distinctively different flavour to the four other British and one French offerings. It's more in the American mould – super speed, lots of bass punch and a lively treble – although it's wrong to liken it to JBL or Klipsch; it's more subtle than that.

The Founder 40B may be one of the smaller cabinets here, but it still is able to let rip with rock and pop – treble is a lively, but not uncouth in any way. Its tweeter's delicacy and speed has knock-on effects down in the midband; you get an etched and incisive sound that's more upfront than most of the others. It's as if you're down in the orchestra pit, rather than up in the balconies. This is allied to an animated but quite plump upper bass that's great for repetitive beat-driven music. Although ever-so-slightly over blown, the low-end is taut and tuneful – and makes the Revival Audio standmount, for example, seem rather sedate in comparison.

Cue up the Led Zep track and it's an edge-of-the seat experience; this speaker shines a bright light on percussion, but is never grating. It

It has a distinctively different flavour to the other speakers in the group

does rhythms very well and vocals are commendably clear and intimate. Yet there's always the sensation of the bass being just a little more intrusive than perhaps it should be. This effect varies depending on the material; the Felt track sounds nicer than via some of the more balanced designs like the Falcon Acoustics, for example, but is a tad too intrusive on the Gregory Isaacs reggae track.

There is a slight 'cuppiness' to the midband sometimes, almost as if the sound is beaming out at the listener. But this also means that the speaker projects into the room better than most of its rivals, and the overall effect is impressively expansive with great depth perspective. Overall then, an interesting design that's well worth auditioning ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★☆

LIKE: Fast, crisp sound; it's a soundstaging star

DISLIKE: Rather lacks the scale of some others here

WE SAY: A highly capable compact standmount

the audio consultants

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FINE TWO CHANNEL AUDIO SYSTEMS

1

Amplifiers with elegance and finesse

Five amplifier manufacturers that offer a more refined sound than many. Their common aim is to produce a more natural sound with an accurate tonal balance, large holographic sound pictures.

2

Audio Analogue have redesigned their Anniversary range which consists of two integrated stereo amplifiers and a pre-power combination. All dual mono designs producing large sound stages.

AVM produce an extensive range of modular designed products at all price points. High quality German build and a high-end sound. The new A 6.2 Master Edition amplifier offers a purist, high quality sound in a compact chassis.

Ayre Acoustics. A renowned US manufacturer of world class audio products offering no compromise designs at exceptional value. Their upgraded 8 Series has the EX-8 2.0 which sets a new high standard within its class.

Hegel known for manufacturing high-end quality electronics at realistic prices. Their wide range of integrated amplifiers include sophisticated DAC designs to support streaming products.

Luxman a legendary Japanese brand renowned for their high-end audio products. Exceptional build quality of reference standard. A retro aesthetic with a truly modern sound from state of-the-art electronics.

3

4

5

A SELECTION FROM OUR CURATED PORTFOLIO

1 Luxman L-507Z £8000
2 AVM Ovation 6.2 Master Edition £8250
3 Ayre EX-8 2.0 with DAC £7950
4 Audio Analogue Puccini Anniversary £4500
5 Hegel H390 with DAC £5250

info@audioconsultants.co.uk 4 Zephyr House Calleva Park Aldermaston Berkshire RG7 8JN UK

Revival Audio
Atalante 3 £2,400

The hi-fi world welcomes another loudspeaker brand, but how will it fare in more established company?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Revival Audio Atalante 3

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
2-way bass reflex standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
11kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
240 x 390 x 270mm

FEATURES
- 28mm soft dome tweeter
- 180mm mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m (4ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Revival Audio

Based in Alsace, France, Revival Audio was co-founded by Daniel Emonts, previously senior acoustic engineer of Dynaudio, and before that Focal-JMLab and Altec Lansing. Co-founder Jacky Lee was hitherto Dynaudio's Chief Commercial Officer, having previously worked for Dynaudio China and IBM in his native Taiwan. *Bon chance*, boys!

The Atalante 3 is a smallish (for this group) two-way reflex ported design that's conventional in engineering terms. The 28mm soft dome tweeter is the company's own design, with patented Anti Reflection Inner Dome technology. Below this is a 180mm mid/bass driver, which – aside from the Mission 770's 200mm mid/bass unit – is the largest here.

The design is described by the company as "retro" and has visual similarly to the Falcon Acoustics M10, albeit with a little design flourish. This comes in the form of a 'belt and knot' design, with laser-etched logo. The gorgeous cabinet is finished in hand-picked walnut veneer, with a two-piece grille. Round the back are the aforementioned bass port and single-wire speaker connectors.

The company claims a frequency response not too different from the average in the group, and a moderate 87dB sensitivity figure. Interestingly though, it puts nominal impedance at 4ohm, half that of most others here. That's not a problem these days, providing you have an amplifier built to drive lower loads – so check manufacturer specs. Placement is easy enough; it more than happily sits close to my rear boundary wall without booming, even without the supplied foam bungs. Being a mirror image pair, I position the tweeters closest to one another.

Sound quality

The Atalante 3 has an open, easy and smooth sound with a tonality that feels instinctively right. All the important facets to its character are appealing, making it a very nice thing to live with. Across a broad range of music, this standmount shows clarity, insight, definition and poise; a real class act you might say. In the context of the group, it's perhaps not the best at anything specific, but don't let that put you off – it's the overall package that really impresses.

Cue up the Felt track, for example. It's a brittle mid-Eighties indie recording, but it's as if the Atalante 3 doesn't care. All the nastiness seems to be taken out and in its place an organic and ethereal sound emerges that perfectly captures the mood. It's not super forensic, yet feels less coloured and/or euphonic than the ATC or Mission in the presence region. Indeed, its clever balance reminds me more of mid-price Dynaudios. What are the chances?

This speaker isn't especially distinguished at either frequency extreme – bass is a tad soft and lacks the ATC's superb attack, and the treble is sweet but not as insightful as the Neat or Paradigm. Yet everything is so well integrated with the midband

An open, easy and smooth sound with a tonality that feels instinctively right

that it doesn't really matter; you get a seamless sound that lets you focus on the music. In this respect, it's spookily similar to the Falcon, but with bigger drive units and more cabinet volume to play with. This competence extends to its imaging capabilities; although not class-leading it's very good at projecting sound out into a room – with fine stage depth too.

With repetitive, bass-driven music like Gregory Isaacs, the Atalante 3 lacks the visceral thump of the ATC, Mission or Neat. It's still lots of fun, though, as everything is so effortless, even at high listening levels. Its slightly soft, subtle nature is probably least well suited to the hardcore techno of Manix, yet is still highly enjoyable even with this. In summary, an endearing and entertaining listen ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★☆
OVERALL ★★★★☆

LIKE: Smooth; natural; seamless sound

DISLIKE: Bass slightly lacks grip

WE SAY: Beguiling, classy performer

MUSICAL FIDELITY

INTRODUCING THE:

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Musical Fidelity M6x DAC

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Group test verdict

After days of comparisons over in speaker's corner, ***Nick Tate*** has finally worked out the ranking order and found a worthy winner

THIS IS A QUIRKY group with a variety of options that don't aim at the mainstream – some are deliberately retro, others almost accidentally so. Only one – the Paradigm – is a typically modern design. And despite the variety on show, there's not a bad one here.

In sixth place is the Revival Audio Atalante 3. In other company it would be much further up the rankings, but the competition is stiff. Highly enjoyable yet subtle and mature sounding, this is a super debut from a company that looks destined to do big things in the future.

Next is Paradigm's Founder 40B, an imaginatively styled and cleverly engineered standmount with a distinctive sound. It's all about speed and engagement, with lots of detail thrown in for good measure. The result is a very enjoyable little speaker.

ATC's SCM19 comes fourth. It's an ageing design, but doesn't sound it – with great control and grip, it seems almost unburstable at high levels and devours rock music that would have most affordable standmounters cowering in the corner. Yet it's not a consummate all-rounder, so doesn't quite match the next little box…

Falcon Acoustics' M10 is a super capable option if you want the best possible sound per pound in a confined listening space. It has a very accessible, friendly nature that defies its own dimensions and sings with any type of music.

Mission's updated 770 is the runner up. Actually, so good is it that in several respects it's better than the winner – including its ability to move vast amounts of air around a large listening room. It has a slightly retro character that's a sort of hybrid of the great speakers of yore, and the great ones of today.

WINNER

Neat's Majistra speaker does so much right and this comes in no small part from its designer daring to be different. Though in some respects it's bettered by the Mission, it has superb clarity, musicality and tonal smoothness, allied to great dynamics and other-worldly bass.

Make/model **ATC** SCM19

Falcon Acoustics M10

Mission 770

Neat Majistra

Paradigm Founder 40B

Revival Audio Atalante 3

	ATC SCM19	Falcon Acoustics M10	Mission 770	Neat Majistra	Paradigm Founder 40B	Revival Audio Atalante 3
Price	£2,400	£2,400	£3,500	£3,500	£2,400	£2,400
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★☆☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
	Rock-solid build and pro-quality drivers that are glorious for rock and live music	One of the best small speakers for sensible money, it punches way above its weightw	A fascinating mix of old and new, this design has a sound that's hard to beat	Superb on so many levels, this quirky design betters more expensive rivals	Puts Paradigm back on the map for affordable, real-world design quality	A sophisticated sounding compact standmount with genuine ability
Website	atcloudspeakers.co.uk	falconacoustics.co.uk	mission.co.uk	neatacoustics.com	paradigm.com	revivalaudio.fr

Key features

Two-way	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ribbon tweeter	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Isobaric	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Sealed	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Reflex	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

TRY WITH THESE

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: Audiolab 9000A £2,000

The company's biggest and best in a long line of amps, sonically it's a real power house that retains the brand's characteristically clean and detailed sound. A better all-rounder than anything at or near its price point.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: PrimaLuna EVO 300 £4,300

This mid-priced tube amp uses six 12AU7s and four EL34 valves to produce a claimed 24W per channel in triode mode and 42W RMS in ultralinear. The latter is just about enough to power any of theses speakers.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: Exposure 3510 £2,250 *HFC* 485

A reassuringly old-school, purist design that sounds highly musically engaging and is slightly euphonic too – with a full and warm bass, subtle midband and sweet treble. It offers a range of expansion options, but still isn't quite as versatile as some price rivals.

Our Latest Work Of Art

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Our new 3510 Series Integrated Amplifier is a masterclass in musicality and power. With 110w RMS, six line inputs and the option to fit a MC or MM phono module or even a plug in DAC, it redefines what is possible in one box amplification. To find out more about our exciting new 3510 Series which also includes a pre-amp as well as power amplifiers, visit **exposurehifi.com** today.

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Choice EXOTICA

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Super stack

This four-box pre/power stack is a bank account buster that shares the styling of the Nu-Vista 800 integrated. Fantasy buy!

Ever get the feeling we've been here before? Well, the arrival of Musical Fidelity's latest amplifier system brings a new twist to the whole *déjà vu* thing as the Nu-Vista naming and macho aesthetics are familiar from the historically hefty Nu-Vista 800 integrated amplifier. That classic tube-equipped integrated, also rated at 300W/8ohm, provided the inspiration for both the industrial and technical design of the PRE and PAS here, the hybrid nuvistor/transistor concept now evolved into a pre/power setup, complete with separate PSUs for each. So one box is now four...

Thus we have an all-analogue fully balanced preamp the Nu-Vista PRE, selling for £20,500 complete with its partnering PRE PSU power supply to which it connects using a trio of umbilical cables. The matching 300W stereo power amp, the £22,000 Nu-Vista PAS, is serviced by the PAS

The sympathetic handling of the instrumental tone is highly impressive

PSU via no fewer than five umbilicals. All four units share the same massive alloy casework, with different fascia and top sections machined away to accommodate grilles and displays, *etc*. as required. The PAS has fluted sidecheeks too in order to improve the heatsinking of its transistor power amp.

The PRE and PRE PSU together weigh in at 47kg while the PAS and PAS PSU add up to 67kg, thanks in no small part to the latter's much heftier toroidal transformers. Want more power? The Nu-Vista series will soon be joined by a monoblock power amp, the PAM, a fully balanced, bridged design rated at 600W/8ohm and pitched at £20,500 apiece. It weighs the same as the PAS and comes in the same metalwork as the units here, all of which are available in a silver or black finish.

While these new components aren't outrageous in terms of size and price in the context of the wider high-end market, they certainly see the brand, now under the wing of Austrian-based Audio Tuning, setting itself more ambitious targets.

With their art deco-inspired casework and 'Call them stunning or bizarre, they'll probably leave you speechless' advertising line, those amps are certainly conversation pieces, and sound every bit as stunning.

A sense of scale is required to appreciate the size of the Nu-Vista PRE's two giant rotaries, one for volume – the preamp has both fixed and variable outputs on RCAs and XLRs – the other to select between its 12 sets of line inputs, again on six pairs of RCAs and six XLRs. There's no phono stage or module bay for an aftermarket DAC option because these facilities are all coming down the line as matching Nu-Vista separates.

Under the milled alloy top plate are two pairs of 6S51N nuvistors per channel, forming a fully balanced input circuit that drives a solid-state Class A output (with +6dB gain option). The latter comprises two pairs of power transistors per channel that would not look out of place in a circa-50W integrated amplifier. Here they are configured for a low impedance, high headroom source to drive the partnering PAS with ease. The power amp is also a hybrid design, employing a similar, fully balanced nuvistor 'op-amp' input/driver stage, this time ahead of a Sanken transistor-based power amp. Musical Fidelity has great experience with this high power, high current output stage configuration.

So, how to position your Nu-Vistas? Out of the box, the amps are provided with 1m PSU umbilicals but 3m sets, for a wider component spacing, are available at £290 for the PRE/PSU and £500 for the PAS/PSU. Spikes, with cups provided to protect the supporting surface, are included for use in place of the felt pads that are otherwise affixed under each chassis' four alloy feet.

Firing up both PRE and PAS is a two-stage process, using first the power switch on each PSU and then the power/standby button on the PRE and PAS' facias (or via remote). Do that and the display will light up, as will the LEDs illuminating the nuvistors, glowing red for about 12 seconds while the output is muted, then orange (still warming up, but unmuted) and, after about 20 minutes, blue indicating optimum performance.

A button on the fascia and remote allows the PRE/PAS displays to be switched between black or white, and between an information readout or level meters. The display brightness can be adjusted by a sequence of button presses on both the PRE and PAS.

Around the back, both PRE and PAS 'communicate' with their respective PSUs via a four-pin XLR control cable while two five-pin XLRs carry power for the nuvistor input stages. The PAS has additional Neutrik-terminated umbilicals for its power amp stage. Given that you'll also have audio cabling between the PRE and PAS themselves, and to the inputs and speaker terminals, and perhaps also to those optional 12V trigger links, you'll have a nest of wiring back there!

Incidentally, twin speaker cable binding posts are provided for each channel, facilitating bi-wiring, but though chunky they are better suited to 4mm than spade terminations.

Sound quality

With all those connections made and checked, and the nuvistor lighting turning blue and then extinguished, the amps are placed between an Aurender W20SE server and dCS

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista PRE, PAS & PSUs

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Pre/power stack

WEIGHT
Nu-Vista PRE: 22kg
PRE PSU: 25kg
Nu-Vista PAS: 27kg
PAS PSU: 40kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
Nu-Vista PRE:
483 x 188 x 506mm
Nu-Vista PRE PSU:
483 x 188 x 478mm
Nu-Vista PAS:
483 x 188 x 494mm
Nu-Vista PAS PSU:
483 x 188 x 478mm

FEATURES
- PRE inputs: 6x RCA; 6x XLR
- PRE outputs: 1x RCA (fixed); 1x XLR (fixed); 1x RCA (variable); 1x XLR (variable)
- PAS inputs: 2x RCA; 2x XLR
- PAS outputs (loopthrough): 1x RCA; 1x XLR

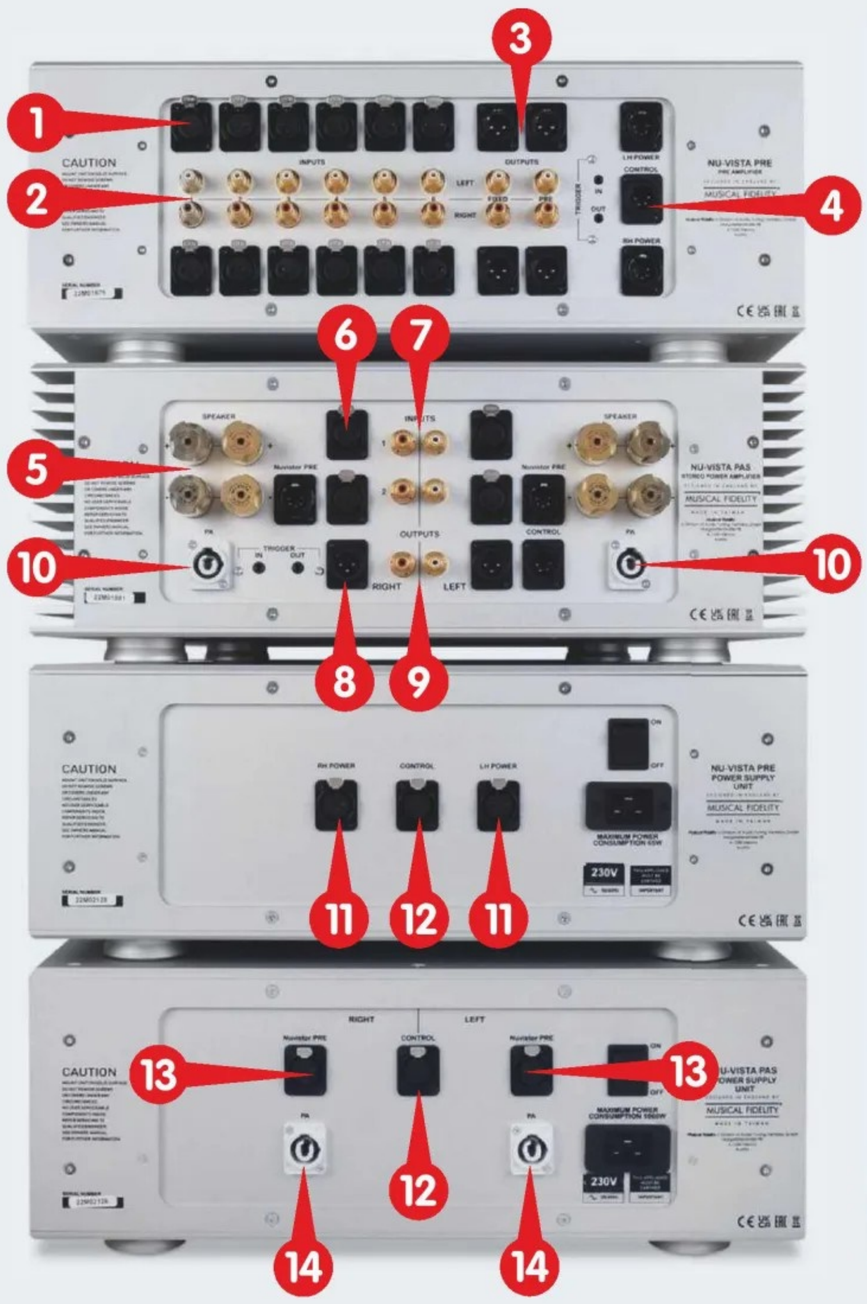
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

WEBSITE
musicalfidelity.com
henleyaudio.co.uk

The pre/power setup comes with separate PSUs for each component

CONNECTIONS

PDF NEWSPAPERS and MAGAZINES: WWW.XSAVA.XYZ



1. 6x balanced XLR inputs (left channel)
2. 6x RCA inputs
3. Balanced XLR outs (fixed and PRE)
4. Preamp PSU connections
5. Loudspeaker outs
6. 2x XLR inputs
7. 2x RCA inputs
8. Balanced XLR outs
9. RCA inputs
10. Power amp PSU input connections
11. Preamp PSU outputs
12. Control/sync connections
13. Pre-level PSU outputs for power amp
14. Main PSU outputs for power amp

THE NUVISTOR STORY

Introduced by RCA in 1959, the nuvistor's brief was simple – tackle all that was deficient in glass-bodied vacuum tubes. By improving on reliability, size, microphony, operating performance (noise, gain, linearity and PSU requirements) and consistency between manufacturing batches, the miniature, metal-bodied nuvistor was rolled out to great fanfare in RCA's television and radio sets. As innovations go, the nuvistor represented a step change in the evolution of vacuum 'tubes', but Germanium transistors were in the ascendent and once their own reliability/performance issues were addressed by the development of silicon devices, the nuvistor was doomed.

These tiny metal cylinders shook the consciousness of our audiophile world again in the late-Nineties when then-owner of Musical Fidelity, Antony Michaelson, acquired a NOS batch. These were deployed in its Nu-Vista Preamplifier before a similar nuvistor line stage found its way into the Nu-Vista 300 amp, CD player and Nu-Vista 800, the latter also the inspiration for the four-box PRE/PAS we have here.

HOW IT COMPARES

Four-box pre/power amplifiers are thin on the ground, but beefy two/three-box £40k+ combos, some including mono power amps, are more plentiful and diverse. Long term favourites include the Preamp 1.0 and Mono 1.0 amplifiers from Constellation's Inspiration series – a pre and two monos costing £43,500 that offer the full-on flavour of deeply musical and muscular high-end amplification. Then there's the powerful and 'illuminating' performance offered by Chord's Ultima Pre 2 Ref with its partnering Ultima Mono Power Amp 2s available at a heady £55k.

Not so deep of pocket? Then great value and even greater power combine in the Michi P5 (*HFC* 467) preamp and M8 monoblock power amp trio from Rotel – a full 1kW/8ohm for under £15k with a warmly detailed and embracing sound to boot.

Vivaldi One APEX SACD player/DAC, here running in balanced 'line out' mode, and B&W 801 D4 (*HFC* 482) floorstanders. And what a combination this makes: from the very opening of Vangelis' remastered *Pulsar*, it is clear that these heavyweight Nu-Vista amps deliver an impression of unburstable power and resolution, the sound imbued with great clarity, detail and confidence, even at very high basic playback levels.

But even more impressive is the sympathetic handling of instrumental tone, as in the beautifully focused view of the guitar on Peter Frampton's take on Roxy Music's *Avalon* from his *...Forgets The Words* covers album, alongside the laidback rhythm section. It's a balance also well suited to *Make Me Rainbows* from the Bill Charlap Trio's *Notes From New York* set, which is delivered with both crisp detail and plenty of dynamic punch.

Switch to Patricia Kopatchinskaja's reading of the *Janacek Violin Sonata* on her *Bartók Janacek Brahms* recital and there's a spine-tingling sense of the rapport between violinist and pianist Fazil Say, which is even more intense in the *Adagio* of the Bartók *Sonata*. In practice, this recording is less about the accompanied violin and more about the duet performance as a whole, and that's exceptionally clear via these Nu-Vista PRE/PAS amps.

The sound is all about character and performance, as is clear with Peter Gabriel's track on the *Here It Is* Leonard Cohen tribute album. The recording is closely detailed and these amplifiers let every detail of that intimacy flood out.

This latest Nu-Vista outing is in no way limited to playing audiophile-approved recordings, as is clear with the DSD64 version of Yes' *Roundabout* from *Fragile*. Steve Howe's opening acoustic guitar is hyper realistic, and then the bass, drums and Rick Wakeman's whirling keyboards kick in with a real slam, the Nu-Vista PAS delivering all the grunt and snarl one could want from a Seventies recording, punched into a 2023 listening room with dramatic effect.

And of course the Nu-Vista PRE and PAS combination is more than up to the task of handling full-bore orchestral recordings, including Benjamin Britten's demanding *Four Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes* [Edward Gardner/BBC Philharmonic; Chandos CHAN 10658]. Here the subtle evocations of rolling waves in the first three movements are just as thrilling, in their implication, as the explosive, menacing power of the *Storm* interlude as it surges, rumbles and threatens towards its thundering climax. Again, the ability of Musical Fidelity's PRE/PAS pairing to render

The Nu-Vista brand is certainly setting itself more ambitious targets

fine detail and the subtleties of orchestral scoring is blended seamlessly with its capacity to release seemingly limitless dynamic power when required while still retaining full control.

Conclusion

These sonic qualities are never more in evidence than with the Paavo Järvi/Orchestre de Paris cycle of Sibelius symphonies [RCA Red Seal 19075924512], as is clear from the opening of the very first work where the clarinet solo gives way to a great soaring tide of orchestral playing. Just let the music wash over you... ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★☆
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: Massive slam; ability to reveal recording subtleties

DISLIKE: A bit hefty

WE SAY: A stunning setup that, though far from cheap, is still remarkable value for money by high-end standards

FURUTECH
PURE TRANSMISSION
NCF®

"...once you've heard it then heard it taken away, you won't want to deny yourself if you can at all avoid it.."
"...you won't be able to remain a tweak cynic when you hear this!"
Srajan Ebaen 6moons.com

NCF
Clear Line-EU

NCF
Clear Line-UK

Introducing the Furutech NCF Clear Line

Plug into any vacant power outlet on the same circuit as your system and immediately experience improvements in the depth and focus of the sound stage, harmonics, and tonal balance. The NCF Clear Line is unique a passive damping device incorporating Furutech's NCF material that will eliminate mechanical and electrical resonance from your power supply.

Furutech NCF Series

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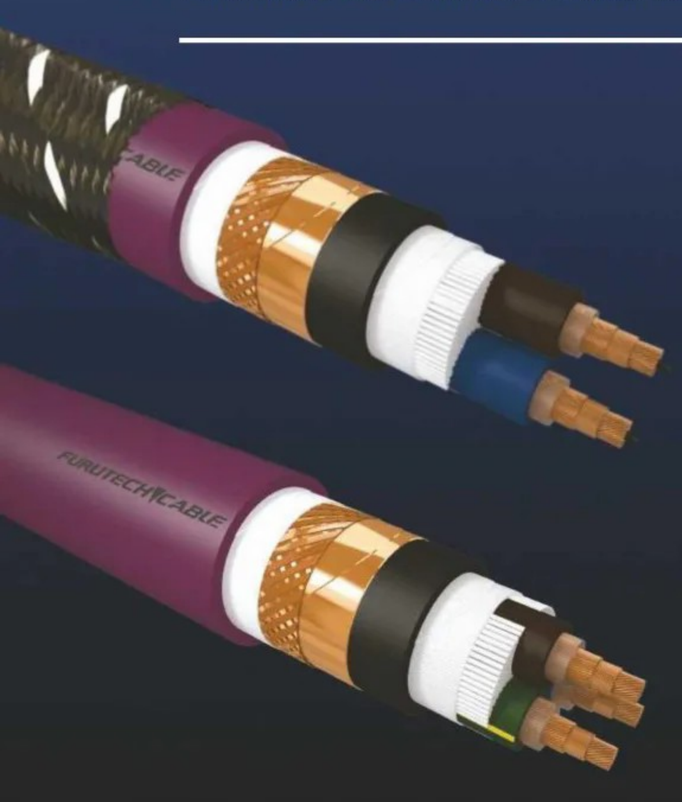

Furutech
DPS-4.1 power cable and DSS-4.1 speaker cable

Furutech's α (Alpha) OCC-DUCC is one of a select few of conductors that Furutech engineers have found to excel in high end sound reproduction. α (Alpha) OCC –DUCC is constructed using a combination of DUCC Ultra Crystallized High Purity Copper and Furutech's world famous Pure Transmission α (Alpha)-OCC.
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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Wooden wonder

Better known for its speakers, ELAC's range of electronics now has a new flagship turntable. ***Ed Selley*** takes it for a spin

Though ELAC is most fondly associated with its JET tweeter system, it also offers a significant range of electronics and this is not something it has only turned to recently. The Miracord 80 Turntable may be new, but the 'Miracord' moniker dates as far back as the late-Forties when it adorned ELAC's first turntable. While it might not be synonymous with vinyl, this is not a case of a company just 'having a go' at turntables.

The 80 is a belt-driven, unsuspended turntable and ELAC has focused on both the mass and its application. While it has a fairly hefty plinth, a significant 5.6kg of the overall weight is in the platter. Combined with a bearing that ELAC describes as its own work, the platter flywheels impressively well at this price. A felt mat also comes bundled and is kept in place throughout testing as it is clearly supposed to be there. Something that isn't present, but does have a positive effect on the overall performance is a record weight. Experiments with a MoFi one during the listening session yield some small but definite improvements.

The motor that acts on this platter is a servo-controlled DC type that has an optical based controller. Power is via a wall-wart PSU operating at 12V. This is a relatively low-torque design that takes a while to spin up. There is electronic speed selection via a three-position dial at the front, while the inclusion of a four-pin PSU input suggests the possibility of a more ornate power supply in the future.

The 10in tonearm combines a carbon armtube with conventional bearings and detachable headshell. As the armtube is straight, the headshell is a more unusual offset type, but it offers an excellent range of adjustments for different cartridges.

Combined with the arm's useful adjustability, it can work with a broad selection of cartridges. If the idea of fitting something feels a little arduous, an extra £200 sees a 'D96' moving-magnet option made by Clearaudio bundled. As the Miracord 80 Turntable has no internal phono stage, you're free to choose whatever you want on it and the arm certainly has enough scope to handle all but the most unusual designs.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
ELAC Miracord 80 Turntable

ORIGIN
Germany/China

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
14kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
470 x 148 x 374mm

FEATURES
- 33, 45 and 78rpm
- 10in carbon tonearm
- Optional Clearaudio D96 cart

DISTRIBUTOR
Hi-Fi Network

WEBSITE
elac.com
hifi-network.com

Pitch stability is extremely good and the noise floor is non-existent

The absence of a phono stage and the flexibility of the arm suggest this isn't really gunning for the lifestyle TT market. Instead, it should be seen as something that people moving up from a sub-£1,000 design will find familiar, but with added performance.

Sound quality

With the painless setup achieved and connected to a Cyrus Phono Signature (*HFC* 408) and Cambridge Audio Edge A, the Miracord 80 Turntable makes some very clear statements about how its design philosophy translates into the overall performance. With Dead Can Dance's *Aion*, it leverages

its mass and the longer arm to sound impressively potent, but additionally allies this with a spaciousness that ensures *Black Sun* doesn't come across as leaden and heavy. It's an authoritative and engaging way of making music. No less importantly, pitch stability is extremely good and the noise floor that the deck exhibits, even into the whisper-quiet Cyrus, remains effectively non-existent.

There are turntables you can buy for similar money that will deliver more urgency, but the unforced, flowing style of the Miracord 80 Turntable begins to make more sense, the more time you spend listening. With really high-tempo recordings you might find yourself seeking a touch more drive, but the glorious southern rock of *Feats Don't Fail Me Now* by Little Feat is delivered with an almost perfect balance of flow and liveliness. Something that consistently helps here is the airiness to the overall soundstage, ensuring that the band has the space it needs to convince.

Impressively, it has more to give if you are willing to fit a cartridge yourself. Replacing the D96 with an Audio-Technica AT-OC9-XEN (*HFC* 452) – costing around £75 more – sees the ELAC lose nothing in terms of its potency and airiness, but has a significant boost to the tonal realism and refinement at the top end, particularly with less than stellar pressings. The arm has no trouble working with the slightly lighter Audio-Technica and the overall performance is usefully improved. If you want a turntable that works into an internal MM phono stage, options from Nagaoka and Goldring will be worth seeking out, and there is very little I can think of at a remotely relevant price point that the arm won't happily accommodate.

Something that the addition of the OC9 helps to focus on (but that is present with the D96 too) is just how much fun this is to listen to. If you need a deck that is consistently lively, you might find that last ounce of urgency lacking, but that style of presentation can be wearying with more relaxed music. The ELAC effectively balances the ability to sound lively with a more considered approach to less ballistic music. Revisiting LCD Soundsystem's *45:33*, with its tempo designed for running – which means it starts slowly, builds and then winds down at the end – shows this to fine effect. At every point during the performance, the Miracord 80 Turntable sounds well judged and utterly engaging.

HOW IT COMPARES

Costing £130 more with the excellent Ania (*HFC* 426) cart, Rega's Planar 8 (*HFC* 443) has a very different design philosophy. When it comes to out-and-out excitement and articulation – even with the Audio-Technica cartridge fitted – the ELAC loses out to the Rega. From there, though, things start to get more competitive. The 80 musters slightly more bass weight than the Planar 8 and there is a little more space to its presentation. I suspect that for classical and jazz in particular, the ELAC might be the better option. Firmly in the Rega's favour, however, is the inclusion of a cover.

Conclusion

In fact, the term 'engaging' rather succinctly sums up this turntable as an overall proposition perfectly. It might not be the brand on the tip of everyone's tongue when considering investing in a two-grand vinyl spinner, but – perhaps because of this – ELAC has been able to go its own way and build a device that focuses on an even-handed and balanced presentation while offering something that's a little different to some of its more mainstream rivals. The result is a vinyl spinner that many buyers would do well to seek out ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Open and weighty sound; well made; flexible design

DISLIKE: Some limits to the supplied cart; lid costs extra; some rivals are more exciting

WE SAY: A different take on the two-grand turntable that has some impressive virtues

OVERALL ★★★★½

All in one

DAP, DAC, amplifier and streaming device, is there anything A&K's new Acro can't do? ***Cliff Joseph*** finds out

Astell&Kern is well known for its range of high-end digital audio players (DAPs) and it also has a range of 'dual-DAC' products aimed at smartphone users. The Acro CA1000T combines both into a single device, providing what the company calls an 'all-in-one head-fi system' that includes a desktop DAP with a powerful built-in DAC and amplifier, plus an impressive range of connectivity and streaming features.

The chunky design of the Acro is pure A&K, with desktop use very much in mind. It's semi-portable, though, as it has a rechargeable battery that lasts for around 11 hours, and you can easily pick it up and move it from room to room when you're at home.

The top panel has a 4.1in touchscreen display, which swivels upwards for easy visibility. This isn't not just for control, however, as it additionally houses a fully functional DAP that employs the same Teraton Alpha technology as found on the company's high-end DAPs. This has 256GB of internal storage, with a slot for a micro-SD memory card to add more should you need it. It supports Bluetooth (with aptX HD and LDAC), has dual-band wi-fi, Roon compatibility and direct Tidal and Qobuz connection.

The dual-DAC employs two ES9039MPRO chips – a world first, according to A&K – with support for up to 32-bit/768KHz, DSD512 and MQA. The front panel houses 3.5mm and 6.35mm, and balanced 2.5mm and 4.4mm connectors, with four levels of gain for driving a variety of headphones. Around the back are mini-XLR and RCA outputs for external speakers, along with coaxial, optical and RCA inputs for external audio sources and a USB-C port.

Sound quality

The Acro's range of input and output options is pretty impressive, but it's primarily designed as a 'head-fi' system for driving headphones, so I turn to recent *Group Test* winner the Px8 (*HFC* 500) from Bowers & Wilkins for my listening schedule.

There's something hypnotic about John Cale's *Mercy* – played in lossless format via USB from my MacBook Pro – and the Acro immediately gets the mood, creating an immersive sense of space as the title track's synths and echoing harmonies envelop my head in a shimmering cloud of sound. But there's an undertow of unease, too, as it pulls out the slow drum pulse and captures the mournful, lugubrious tone of Cale's voice.

While I'm not competent to judge Ringo Starr's merits as a drummer, with a 24-bit remaster of *Abbey Road* (released in 2019) the Acro delivers the light, skittering rhythm of the percussion, with drums, snare and cymbals smoothly overlapping as though played on a single instrument. There's a loose, relaxed rhythm to the bass guitar too, and when everything kicks up a gear, the Acro reveals the grit in the chugging guitar chords, and the sharp, glassy sound of Ringo's cymbals as they stab through the air.

The Acro is equally adept with the delicate strings of Max Richter's *On The Nature Of Daylight*. It patiently allows the slow introduction to emerge, bringing out the rich, deep tone of the cellos. Then it steps back and opens up the soundstage as the violins enter, highlighting the contrast between them and the deeper strings. The climax of the piece has even more impact than the original string quartet version, and the Acro manages to keep each set of strings clearly in focus as the orchestra surges forwards, before slowly winding down and fading away.

Conclusion

Of course, not everyone will need a multi-purpose DAP/DAC combo such as the Acro CA1000T, especially at this price. But, for those who enjoy the high-quality sound of Astell&Kern's DAPs, this is a tempting all-in-one system that will also work well as part of a larger hi-fi setup ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Astell&Kern Acro CA1000T

ORIGIN
Korea

TYPE
Desktop/portable DAP/DAC/amp

WEIGHT
980g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
105 x 45 x 156mm

FEATURES
- Outputs: 2.5mm; 3.5mm; 4.4mm and 6.35mm (headphones); mini-XLR; RCA
- Inputs: coaxial; optical; RCA; USB-C
- 32-bit/768KHz; DSD512; MQA

DISTRIBUTOR
Astell&Kern

WEBSITE
astellkern.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

LIKE: DAP/DAC combo with impressive sound quality; connectivity

DISLIKE: Expensive; no accessories

WE SAY: An impressive all-in-one headphone system

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AURALIC PRESS AWARDS

Three for all

The 700 Series receives a helping of tech from the flagship 800 models. ***Ed Selley*** sees how the smallest speaker fares

B&W's 700 Series has long had the job of taking ideas from the 800 range and bringing them to a vaguely terrestrial price point. For this third iteration, the principle is the same.

With the 705 S3, this includes changes to the tweeter in the shape of tweeter-on-top. The new housing is longer, more solidly damped and better isolated than before. It comes in the shape of the 25mm carbon dome unit used previously.

This hands over to a 165mm 'Continuum' mid/bass driver, which is also materially similar to before. What has changed is the way it is mounted in the cabinet, employing a new module to contain it and prevent unwanted interference.

The cabinet sees more substantial revisions. Bracing has been upgraded so it is substantially stiffer and more inert, while the front panel now has a curved profile. The curve mimics the principle of the multi-layer ply arrangement in the 800 Series, where the drivers are sited at the stiffest point of the curve. There are some other welcome touches too, like the revised speaker terminals that are arranged horizontally and look and feel rather more substantial than before. Combined with the black, white and wood finishes, the 705 S3 feels worth the asking price. The FS-700 S3 dedicated stand is available at an additional cost of £800.

Sound quality

As there wasn't a great deal wrong with the previous 705 (*HFC* 430), it should not come as a huge surprise to find that this new model puts in a strong showing. The revisions to the cabinet deliver real benefits to the speaker's ability to disappear into the soundstage it creates. Listening to the unplugged version of Emily King's *Can't Hold Me Now*, the 705 S3 vanishes into a three-dimensional image that extends beyond the position of the cabinets themselves without making King herself feel disproportionately large or diffuse. This is helped by tonal realism that is exceptionally good. There's nothing overtly showy about how the Bowers & Wilkins goes about delivering voices and instruments, but the longer you listen the more effortlessly convincing it becomes.

Audio memory is a fragile thing, but there is sometimes a sense that the older 705 Signature could sound fractionally more exciting, but it would be a stretch to call the 705 S3 dull in any way. Bass extension is also usefully deep for what is a relatively small cabinet. No less importantly, it displays the same agility and detail as the upper registers.

The most significant area of improvement is that this is a more forgiving speaker than its predecessor. The Bowers & Wilkins strap line of 'Studio sound comes home' has been achieved in that this is an accurate and detailed speaker, but one that is able to handle the not terribly hi-fi rumblings of Acid Arab's *Leila* without making the flaws too apparent. It also shows itself to be happier on the end of less expensive equipment than I remember the older version being. A significant amount of testing takes place with Rega's talented but significantly cheaper Elex MK4 (*HFC* 500) and the performance suggests this is an ideal upgrade for less expensive electronics.

Conclusion

It probably isn't too surprising that the 705 S3 doesn't rewrite the script of what the 700 Series does as Bowers & Wilkins is entirely happy with it. What it instead offers is an ongoing refinement of the concept that makes for a better listening experience and one that can be enjoyed across a wider spread of partnering equipment. This is an extremely capable and engaging speaker that is likely to win many listeners over to its way of doing things ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins 705 S3

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
9.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
192 x 413 x 337mm

FEATURES
- 25mm tweeter-on-top carbon dome
- 165mm Continuum mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m (8ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Bowers & Wilkins

WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★½

LIKE: Detailed, spacious yet forgiving presentation; well-made and attractive

DISLIKE: Can lack a little excitement

WE SAY: A talented speaker that will drop into a wide selection of systems and delight in almost all of them

ortofon

accuracy in sound

2M

The 2M Series, named after the abbreviation of Moving Magnet (MM) technology, is an affordable range of pick-up cartridges with first-class audio design principles throughout. Featuring Ortofon's trademarked split-pole pin technology for a flat frequency response, all 2M cartridges have a high output for easy integration into any turntable system.

Ortofon's philosophy is to play the record sound as accurately as possible, without colouring the sound in any way. Both the 2M Bronze and 2M Black have diamonds which are cut and polished to the highest standards of the industry. The 2M Bronze and 2M Black also have interchangeable stylus units, and replacement styli are readily available in the UK.

The 2M range has been structured in the same way as the popular Rondo and Cadenza Moving Coil series, with ascending quality as you move from Red - Blue - Bronze - Black. The spectacular 2M Black has become the flagship of 2M, and all Ortofon moving magnet cartridges. 2M was also the last product designed by Ortofon's former chief engineer, Per Windfield, who developed the 2M series over the final 2 years of his 30 year tenure with Ortofon.

Red

A hugely popular all-purpose cartridge with a Tipped Elliptical stylus that delivers an open, dynamic sound with a slight touch of warmth.

Blue

An affordable step up in the range, which adds a greater resolution, dynamics, and detailed sound thanks to the Nude Elliptical stylus.

Bronze

Featuring a superior body, the Bronze picks up even the highest frequency information for a rich, detailed and deep soundstage, and can be further upgraded with ease.

Black

The musician's choice and flagship of the range, the 2M Black features a Nude Shibata stylus which guarantees a true-to-life sound performance. This is truly the best MM has to offer.

Black LVB 250

Built on the legendary 2M Black whilst tipping its hat to the legendary composer Ludvig Van Beethoven, the 2M Black LVB 250 uses a Nude Shibata Diamond on a Boron cantilever to perform at its best.

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

One for all

German high-ender AVM wants to make top all-in-one performers. ***David Vivian*** takes a listen to its all-singing integrated amp

You know, the best ideas don't die, they simply move with the times. Take the typically unlovely MDF and plastic music centre that graced many a teak dresser in the mid-to-late Seventies. Absurdly bulky, badly compromised and rubbish by the hi-fi standards of the day, the briefly fashionable turntable, cassette deck, tuner and amp all-in-one with add-on speakers (of highly dubious quality) was nevertheless an ace idea waiting for its time to come.

Not only has it come, it appears to be on course to conquer, the twin trends of convergence and convenience achieving maximum traction in this digital age. Whether we choose to embrace it or not, it's given us a viable reason not to access our musical jollies via a coalition of individual components laced together with hard-to-hide cables. But even in a burgeoning market for high-performance plug 'n' play minimalism, AVM's AS 2.3 is strikingly, almost inscrutably, sleek – a compact, screwless, flush-surfaced, feature-dense nugget of aesthetically neutral tech that looks great anywhere.

Compact all-in-ones have been German high-end brand AVM's stock-in-trade since the Nineties. Unlike some of its older models, the AS 2.3 doesn't have a slot-loading compact disc drive, its omission perhaps understandably tilting the user experience towards streaming, though hooking up a transport isn't a problem. Instead, AVM styles the AS 2.3 a: "modern integrated amplifier". 'With benefits' is kind of a given. Most obviously, it points to the company's powerful X-Stream Engine and gives a conspicuous nod to the new RC X app that's used to control all aspects of its operation. Every millimetre of the necessarily rather limited space on the rear is given over to connections, which includes the increasingly common HDMI ARC TV slot. All stoked up by plenty of trickle-down tech from above? You bet, the much larger CS 8.3 all-in-one flagship providing the inspiration and selected goodies.

Core is the new AVM X-Stream Engine network platform developed in-house, which is entirely software based and updatable and does all the hi-res formats up to DSD256. As well as the HDMI ARC interface, latest Bluetooth codecs and all the usual digital inputs plus two analogue RCA sockets and a USB-A port for external storage, the digital outputs are all level adjustable. Another AVM product line is its Rotation range of up-market turntables, so naturally the company has paid appropriate attention to the quality of the AS 2.3's on board MM/MC phono stage, again with tech trickled down and re-engineered to fit in the AS 2.3's compact chassis.

Considerable effort has also been put in to making the control app as clear and intuitive as possible, and that certainly checks out. It's one of the best

The way ambience and timbre are rendered is very impressive indeed

I've used – just as well as there isn't the luxury of a supplied remote to back things up, though the crisp OLED display offers some touch functions such as playback and tone control adjustment. Along with Spotify Connect, it's good to see Tidal Connect, Qobuz and HiResAudio integrated into the app and it would be a big surprise if the AS 2.3 wasn't certified Roon Ready and AirPlay 2 compatible. No surprises.

The AS 2.3 certainly doesn't want for poke, claiming 140W per channel of Class D power, the amp stage taking key cues from that used in the CS 8.3 flagship but optimised for use in the smaller model. AVM claims the AS 2.3 fears no speaker, however exotic or power hungry and it may well have a point. DAC duties fall to the latest ESS 9038 chipset, though quite rightly AVM points out that the AS 2.3's

DETAILS

PRODUCT
AVM Inspiration AS 2.3

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
All-in-one integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
7.1kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 100 x 320mm

FEATURES
- Claimed power output: 2x 140W (8ohm)
- Inputs: HDMI ARC; 1x optical; 1x coaxial; USB-A
- Airplay 2; Roon ready; Bluetooth 4.2

DISTRIBUTOR
PMC Speakers

WEBSITE
avm.audio
pmc-speakers.com

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REFERENCE PREMIERE

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ultimate sound quality rests just as much with the company's decades of accumulated development nous.

That admirably contained aesthetic? It can be tweaked to taste, the supplied unit's restrained aluminium silver finish looking distinctly plain beside the special-order Cellini version with its chrome-plated and hand polished fascia. Black is the other standard option, and very smart, too. Build is ridiculously good, but then this is a pricey thing and all AVM products are meticulously hand assembled with components sourced from suppliers local to its Malsch factory. Quality control is claimed to be similarly exacting with repeated checks during all manufacturing steps and a break-in period of several days for each unit.

Sound quality

Beyond firing up the app, inserting an Ethernet cable (the network can also be accessed wirelessly), plugging in a pair of speakers and, possibly, a turntable, there's nothing much more to the set-up process. To give the Class D amp's impressive 140W output something to think about, I choose ATC's ever-capable SCM40 (*HFC* 389) floorstander – a big, fairly insensitive sealed box that requires a beefy amp with plenty of grip to come to life. Finally, my Rega Planar 6 (*HFC* 453) and Ania (*HFC* 452) moving-coil cartridge give the impedance adjustable phono stage a whirl.

The RC X app is a wonderful thing. The right half of the screen is devoted to playback, player functions and volume control, and the left takes care of menu options and library navigation. Usefully, there's a Home button to zip back to square one if needed. Simple.

First up on Tidal, the opening track from Van Morrison's *Moving On Skiffle*. Elizabeth Cotten's terrific *Freight Train* certainly has momentum thanks to the relaxed rhythmic chug-a-long conjured by organ and guitar with Van's inimitable vocal providing the necessary acerbic anchor through the first verse before the backing singers add gorgeous harmonic texture for a richer ride to the end.

Coming immediately after a setup incorporating a Line Magnetic tube amp, the tonal temperature is a little cooler, the presentation leaner and tauter. But there's no mistaking the uptick in precision, transparency and control of the ATC's large, heavy woofer. Particularly impressive is the way ambience and timbre are rendered with as much care as the AVM's spry way with pace and timing.

With an Audiolab 6000 CDT CD transport optically tethered to it, fast-fingered guitarist Brian Bromberg's immaculately produced version of the Hendrix classic *Fire* dials up the decibels and tempo, and is delivered with tremendous energy and verve, the big ATC speaker squaring its shoulders and responding enthusiastically to the cranked AS 2.3's bidding. Bromberg's fret gymnastics are cleanly delivered over blistering drumming and superbly heavy and twangy bass guitar – a properly thrilling visceral presence in the room.

The AVM's built-in phono stage is no slouch, either, as eager to please as the production team behind Bruno Mars singing *Finesse* from *24-Carat Magic*, yet easily able to capture the direct, pared-back sonic mien of Fifties studio recording at its best with Sonny Rollins blowing up a storm on *Saxophone Colossus*. Unless you own a five-figure turntable and really want to push the boat out, there's no pressing need to buy a separate phono preamp.

Conclusion

No amount of all-in-one excellence – even as supplied by the exceptional AS 2.3 – will part dyed-in-the-wool audiophiles from their main system separates. If ultimate sound quality is the goal, it's still the only way to go. If however, for whatever reason, the separates must go, the fully evolved 21st-century music centre has a lot going for it, and the AVM Inspirational AS 2.3 more than most ●

HOW IT COMPARES

Expensive as the AVM is, you can see, hear and feel where the money has gone. Two more affordable alternatives spring to mind. Arguably just as stylish, Cambridge Audio's EVO 150 is, likewise, steps ahead of your typical streaming amp and a true object of desire with loads of flexibility and great sound. Equally hard to overlook, Naim's Uniti Star (*HFC* 433) also combines broad functionality with Naim's distinctively pacey and grippy sonic personality.

Connectivity boxes are all ticked, thanks to optical, coaxial, HDMI ARC, RCA and phono stage inputs

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Design; compact size; build; app, transparent; super grippy sound

DISLIKE: No CD drive

WE SAY: There are cheaper all-in-ones, but we can't think of any that are as classy, well-made or sound as good as this one

OVERALL ★★★★½

ifi

The sound of freedom

You love music. It excites you, soothes you, stimulates you. You've invested in a great audio system for your home, so why compromise when you're out and about? iFi makes a range of award-winning portable DAC/headphone amps with fully balanced circuitry to make the most of your music, wherever you happen to be. These are hi-fi systems that fit in your pocket – high-performance audio that's ready to go.

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hip dac2

Bold, distinctive and affordable. Five-star sound that fits in your pocket.

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Super-versatile, ultra-res DAC/headphone amp. High-end hi-fi that goes where you go.

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Forty something

Creek Audio is celebrating its big four-o with the release of the new 4040 A integrated. ***Nick Tate*** lights the candles and listens in

Our story starts back in the mists of the Seventies when a young Michael Creek was working for his father's audio business – Wyndsor Recording Co. Ltd. – learning the ropes in anticipation of one day going it alone. Finally, after a stretch as a design consultant, he decided to branch out on his own, and Creek Audio Systems was formed in 1981.

The first Creek CAS4040 was sold on 31 March 1982, to Audio Projects in Leeds, and retailed for just £99. It was a comparatively small 30W RMS per channel solid-state integrated: "based upon an upgraded version of a 10W power amp circuit employed at Wyndsor in 1976", remembers Mike.

It was an audacious move, because back at that time the hi-fi world was dominated by the NAD 3020 – an extremely capable 20W amplifier that sounded better than most rivals costing twice its price.

All the same, the Creek began to sell very well – with many cash-strapped rookie audiophiles preferring the CAS4040. The rest, as they say is history. Mike first made 100 pieces with a £4,000 bank loan; by 1985 he was selling 1,200 amps and 350 tuners per month. His total sales were approximately 25,000 CAS4040s by 1991, when he sold the company to TGI group. To cut a long story short, he bought Creek back a couple of years later and has been running it ever since.

Launched to celebrate the company's 40th anniversary, in engineering terms there's virtually nothing on the 4040 A similar to the original. The new amp uses MERUS Infineon Technology MA12070 Class D amplifier modules, which Mike says have not been used in any hi-fi amplifier before. It offers very low power consumption and cool operation, with a claimed 91 percent efficiency at full power – plus excellent measured performance. This works with the company's specially developed switching power supply, rated at 350W and voltage-stabilised; it doubles its power output each time the load impedance is halved, regardless of the mains voltage. The result is a claimed 55W RMS into 8ohm and twice that into 4.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Creek 4040 A

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 60 x 255mm

FEATURES
- Quoted power output: 55W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 2x RCA; 1x XLR; 1x coaxial; 1x optical; USB
- aptX HD Bluetooth
- ESS Sabre ES9018 DAC

DISTRIBUTOR
Creek Audio

WEBSITE
creekaudio.com

The amp is relatively generous in terms of features; there are two pairs of unbalanced RCA phono and one pair of balanced XLR inputs. The second auxiliary input can be reconfigured to accommodate Creek's Sequel Mk4 phono board. Four digital inputs are fitted; one coaxial, one optical, one USB 2.0 and Bluetooth aptX HD. Digital conversion is courtesy of an ESS Sabre ES9018 stereo DAC.

It has the signature sound of Creek amps of old, but updates it for the 21st century

Operation is easy enough, thanks to the handy menu system via the front panel controls and small display. It sports a range of features including optional automatic shut down. With a power consumption of under 0.5W on standby, 5W on idle and 250W at full tilt, it's a lot cheaper to run than your average valve amplifier. A 6.35mm headphone socket is supplied.

Considering its modest price, this new Creek amp feels well made with a decently finished case and a smooth fascia, plus a fine-pitch display that's just a little on the small side. The back panel is reasonably classy too – with 4mm loudspeaker binding posts with both rear and side entry, plus a spade lug. The 4040 A is available in a choice of black or silver fascias.

Sound quality

The original Creek CAS4040 had a tonally warm and fulsome sound, one

that was less about physicality than it was musicality. The new 4040 A shares this characteristic, even if it isn't particularly similar in other respects. It's less fluffy and woolly, and more defined; instruments in the mix are better resolved and everything is a lot more explicit.

This, of course, is a good thing; the new Creek combines much of the attractive signature sound of Mike Creek's earlier and very impressive amplifiers, but updates things a little for the 21st century. Driving a pair of Cambridge Audio Aero 6 (*HFC* 382) floorstanders, the 4040 A makes a very nice noise playing classic Eighties pop. Duran Duran's *New Moon On Monday* has a suitably high level of pomp and circumstance, the little Creek amp setting up a surprisingly wide soundstage and generally sounding a lot bigger than its small size suggests.

There's virtually nothing on the new 4040 A similar to the original amplifier

It has a surprising amount of power too, and can go quite loud with little apparent sense of strain – especially when driving more efficient speakers like the aforementioned Aero 6. It lacks the gnarly, grippy bass of more expensive integrateds, such as the Exposure 3510 (*HFC* 485) at four times its price. Yet for its position in life it punches bigger and harder than it should. Importantly, though, it's not just speaker-driving ability that's important, it's what it does with them. The bassline to the Duran Duran track is enjoyably fluid, the amp seemingly having fun with the job in hand.

With more rarefied, cerebral indie pop such as Felt's *Primitive Painters*, it successfully captures the track's emotional poignancy. It actually times rather well, certainly considering its price, and delivers a rhythmically engaging performance that has me immersed in the song. Switching from my Chord Hugo TT2 (*HFC* 468) DAC going in to the analogue input, to the Creek's own built-in digital converter, sees a slight reduction in poise and polish, but things still come over in a more direct way. It sounds a little more upfront and unmediated, with a slight improvement in dynamics – as evidenced by the powerful crescendos in the song. It also resolves the multi-layered jangly guitars and stays in control even with the volume turned right up.

Feed it some classic modern jazz, such as Herbie Hancock's lovely, lilting *I Have A Dream*, and the Creek sets up a convincingly large soundstage. We're not at the level of amps at twice its price, but it does better for the money than you'd think. The location of the respective instruments in the recorded acoustic is believable and the amp lets you follow each player with relative ease. Better still, it strings everything together well – making for a flowing, fluid rendition of this late-Sixties song. I'd say the original CAS4040 does slightly better in this respect – but it doesn't quite have the detail of the new amp.

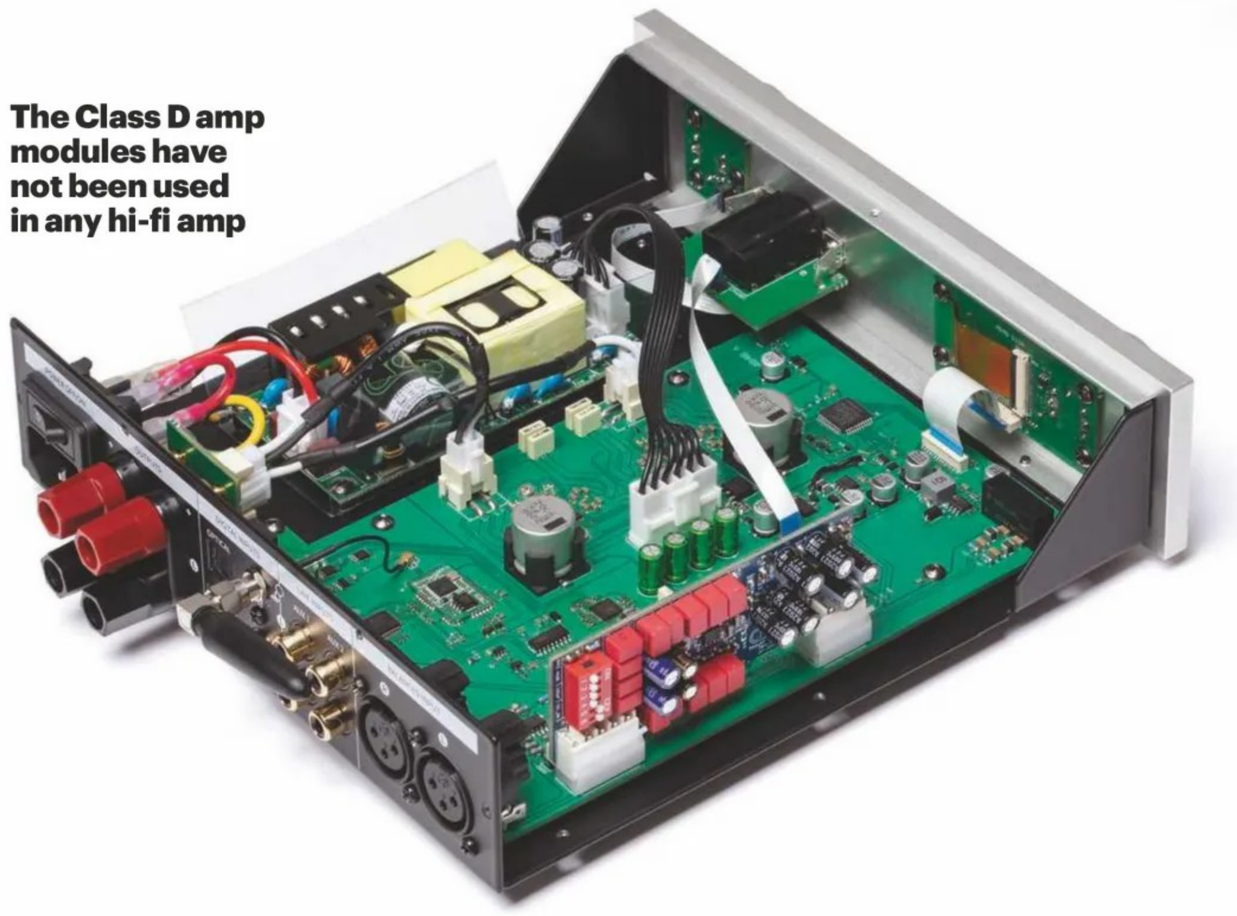
Even with highbrow classical music, such as the Berlin Philharmonic playing Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* (Karajan, Deutsche Grammophon), the 4040 A makes a very nice noise. It's certainly one of the most 'human' Class D designs I've heard; it lacks the absolute power of bigger and more expensive amps, but is very listenable under normal conditions, even low volumes. This gorgeous piece of music is great fun, ebbing and flowing with ease before reaching powerful, emotional climaxes. In absolute terms it can be a little opaque and soft around the edges, but this never detracts from the overall enjoyment.

Conclusion

Considering its very modest price and pintpot size, the Creek 4040 A achieves an awful lot. It's fascinating that despite its quite different technological DNA to the original, it retains the very attractive and desirable Creek 'house sound'. Here's hoping the company's next 40 years will be just as fruitful ●

HOW IT COMPARES

The Pro-Ject Stereo Box DS2 has a lot in common with the new Creek. The two integrateds are very similar in size and nearly the same weight; both have a dedicated headphone stage, Bluetooth and MM/MC phono cartridge functionality (although it's optional on the Creek). Aesthetically the Pro-Ject wins the day, with its clean fascia and optional magnetic side panels, in a choice of eucalyptus, rosenut and walnut. Sonically though, the warmer, more musical Creek pulls ahead; the Pro-Ject is very good, but lacks its rival's human touch.



The Class D amp modules have not been used in any hi-fi amp

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆

FEATURES ★★★★☆

LIKE: Musical, enjoyable sound; packaging

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Trad values in a modern setting

OVERALL ★★★★★

Core values

Apple's revamped HomePod smart speaker offers attractive sound quality, but its Apple-centric focus remains frustrating for ***Cliff Joseph***

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Apple HomePod (2nd generation)
ORIGIN
US/Vietnam
TYPE
Smart speaker
WEIGHT
2.3kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
142 x 168 x 142mm
FEATURES
- 5x tweeters; 102mm bass driver
- Connectivity: wi-fi; AirPlay 2
- Dolby Atmos; Dolby 5.1, 7.1

DISTRIBUTOR
Apple UK
WEBSITE
apple.com/uk

It's probably safe to say the original HomePod (*HFC* 444) wasn't as successful as Apple had hoped it would be. It was quietly dropped a couple of years ago and replaced by the more affordable HomePod mini, whose £99 price tag ensured that it received a much more favourable reception. Perhaps encouraged by the success of the HomePod mini, Apple has now launched a new version of the original HomePod, which now comes with a modest £20 price cut.

At first glance, the new HomePod looks identical to its predecessor, but there is a number of differences, both inside and out. The cylindrical design and mesh fabric cover look familiar, but it is now available in white or 'midnight' grey. It's also slightly smaller. The power is now detachable. The silicon-rubber base has also been altered to eliminate the smudge marks that were left on furniture by the original.

More important are the changes on the inside. The basic design remains unchanged, with a circular array of tweeters located in the base, while a single upwards-firing bass driver sits at the top. Surprisingly, this second-generation HomePod actually reduces the number of tweeters from seven to five. Apple argues the overall sound quality has improved, thanks to the new 'computational audio' features controlled by its S7 processor. This utilises four microphones that can monitor the way that sound is reflected from surfaces in the room and adjusts the audio accordingly. A fifth mic is used solely for Bass-EQ, and tweaks the bass depending on whether the HomePod is close to a wall or has more space around it.

New temperature and humidity sensors can be used with the Siri voice assistant or Apple Home app, allowing the HomePod to do stuff like turning on your central heating when the temperature drops below a certain point. Improved compatibility with smart lights, security cameras and other 'smart' devices developed by other companies are also on hand.

Even so, compatibility remains one of the HomePod's biggest limitations. Like the original, the second-gen HomePod omits any wired audio connections and requires an iPhone or iPad for the initial set-up process. And while Bluetooth is used for this there's no Bluetooth audio support.

The sense of space that emerges is the real strength of the updated HomePod

Your only option is wi-fi and AirPlay 2. To be fair, AirPlay does work well, providing the ability to link two HomePods together as a stereo pair, or to create a multi-room system that also includes AirPlay-compatible speakers from other manufacturers. The problem with AirPlay is that it's only designed to work with Apple devices, so you can't stream music from an Android smartphone or tablet.

Sound quality

I still have the original HomePod from 2018, so I can compare it with the new 2023 edition. The most obvious difference is that the new version sounds a little louder, as I start playing *Words* by Low. Its Bass-EQ feature seems to work well too, as the sinister bass guitar pulse that opens the song sounds firmer and more threatening. The new HomePod is also more alert to the slight change in pace and volume as the bass starts gently and then slowly surges forward. The higher frequencies are more evenly matched on the two speakers, but the new HomePod delivers Alan Sparhawk's steel guitar with a bright, clear tone and there's a nice sense of space for such a compact speaker, as the guitar reverberates. Sparhawk's voice is silky smooth and his harmonies with Mimi Parker see the HomePod capture the rich, warm texture as their voices combine, and somehow manage to make even Low's most chilling melodies sound strangely comforting.

In contrast, there's nothing disturbing about Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel Im Spiegel*, especially not the

outstanding version performed by Hélène Grimaud and Lisa Batiashvili.

It's the delicacy of this particular performance that stands out on this oft-recorded piece, and the HomePod does a fine job catching the light, firm tone of Grimaud's piano and the slow drama of the intermittent deeper notes. There's a wonderfully bittersweet tone to the violin and the HomePod does well to create a relaxed, open soundstage that allows the two melodies to slowly circle and intertwine. It's that sense of space that emerges as the real strength of the updated speaker and, since Apple provided a pair for us to test, this seems like a good moment to connect them and see how they fair as a wireless 2.0-stereo system .

Needless to say, the stereo pair is even more powerful, easily filling the room with sound and, even with this delicate melody, I don't need to push the volume past 50 percent. My only minor criticism here is that the sense of stereo separation isn't quite as precise as I might have hoped. Firing up the instrumental version of Queen's *A Kind Of Magic*, I can hear Brian May's guitars bouncing from left to right, but the almost exaggerated panning effect – with ascending and descending runs ricocheting from side to side – isn't as precisely placed as it can be.

HOW IT COMPARES

The Sonos One (*HFC* 470) is the most obvious rival to the HomePod. Both have limited connectivity, relying on wi-fi to hook up to your home network. The new HomePod has the edge on sound quality, creating a more spacious and open soundstage. The Sonos One is cheaper at £200. And, while the HomePod is primarily designed for use with Apple devices, the Sonos app is available for a much wider range of devices and supports multiple streaming music services too.

The HomePod still has one trick up its sleeve, though, as it now supports

Sound quality has improved, thanks to new 'computational audio' features

Dolby Atmos. This can be used for listening to 'spatial audio' on the Apple Music streaming service and also works for watching films that have an Atmos soundtrack. The firm bass of the HomePod is once more apparent in the opening scenes of *Blade Runner*, adding drama to the bursts of flame that illuminate the Los Angeles skyline, and the electronic chimes and percussion of Vangelis' score shimmer in the air, creating an effective sense of immersion. And, right on cue, the 2019-vintage hover-car comes zooming out of the screen, with the twin HomePods precisely following the sound as it zooms past me on the left, and off into the distance. The film's closing scenes are wonderfully atmospheric, as the rain and electronic score swirl through the air.

Conclusion

It's a highly effective performance and the new HomePod can certainly work well as part of a home cinema setup, especially if you also own an Apple TV box that supports Dolby Atmos and AirPlay. Ultimately, though, it may well be the HomePod's connectivity that is the crucial feature for many prospective buyers. Its quick and easy setup with Apple devices will be worth the high price for those who are already Apple users, but its limited ability to connect with non-iOS devices and streaming services means that it won't be ideal for homes where Windows and Android are also in use ●

Two HomePods can be linked to form a stereo pair

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½

FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Spacious, open sound; firm bass; multi-room capabilities

DISLIKE: Limited connectivity for non-Apple devices

WE SAY: Impressive sound for a compact speaker, but it's very much for Apple fans only

OVERALL ★★★★½

The new Bowers & Wilkins 700 Series is defined by elegance and driven by performance. The range is enabled by technologies first developed for our flagship 800 Series Diamond, and with eight models to choose from, there's a speaker to suit every home.

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DESTINATION: LEITH

Welcome to a friendly haven of Californian cool in the creative heart of a former Edinburgh port. ***Simon Berkovitch*** samples the sunshine on Leith

Since opening the shop, my collection has… grown somewhat," laughs Good Vibes' co-owner Mike. "I wouldn't characterise myself as a crazed collector. However, I am the type of person that must visit a record shop if we visit a city, and I'll always pick up a few records." Go on, admit it: you're that type too and this vinyl emporium should be a must-visit when exploring Edinburgh and vibrant Leith. To quote the website: "welcome to your neighbourhood records, books and objects store…"

Good Vibes officially opened in December 2020 – "Yes, right slap bang in the middle of Covid and extremely disruptive tramworks on our street," says Mike, "but we have been trading properly for two years now."

The store's name not only radiates positivity but also does what it says on the tin. "We honestly deliberated over this longer than anything else as we feared it sounded immensely cheesy – like the sort of phrase you'd find on a crappy Primark jumper. However, we felt the message rung true to what we were wanting to build in the neighbourhood, so stuck with it," he explains.

"We have a mix of lovely regulars who pop in every week for a dig and a catch-up

"As we're a small shop, our selection is a nice curated mix spread over genres and labels"

alongside new customers. The only difference is we're starting to get people seeking us out who are from much further afield, which is really exciting. Recent celebrity customers have included Kae Tempest and Ricky Maymi of the Brian Jonestown Massacre." And *HFC*, of course.

Mike and his wife (and the store's co-owner) Fiona have transformed a run-down, long-abandoned, three-storey Victorian townhouse on Constitution Street in the heart of Leith, having it restored and reworked to create the Good Vibes studios and record and book shop. Good Vibes Neighbourhood Store can be found on the ground floor and, "the top two floors consist of artist spaces that we rent out to our lovely creative tenants," Mike explains. He and Fiona run the store – along with dog Woody and their new recruit Scout. "He's only four months old but he's getting the hang of it."

Taking the leap

Since taking on the building, the pair, "just fell in love with the space", Mike explains. "All three floors were originally planned to be part of the creative studios, but Fiona and I had always dreamed of a local record and book shop opening in our neighbourhood. So, after much planning, freaking out and more planning, we decided to take the leap to do it ourselves.

Picture credits: Jack Alan

There's a psychedelic theme to the store that feels like it's in Good Vibes' DNA

"We have six studios and a free space that can host exhibitions upstairs that we run, and it houses 11 incredible creatives that work in various fields – from photography and animation to jewellery and book design. It's an amazing community within the building, and we like to think having a little record and book shop attached to your studio space is a nice little draw."

The shop is a feast for the eye: it's all wooden floors and rugs, art and vinyl sleeves on the walls, sleek browsers and an exquisitely curated selection of books and objects on the shelves. It's minimal – and designed to make the maximum impact. In short, it's a friendly and welcoming space. Good vibes indeed abound. To this visitor, it's a poster child for the modern face of Leith.

Mike adds: "I've lived in Leith for 15 years, and it's changed so dramatically in that time that it's nearly unrecognisable. It's an old port area just north of Edinburgh that's full of history. It's a real cultural hub now and is full of incredible new businesses. There's breweries, pubs, restaurants, venues, and shops of all kinds. We just wanted to add to that vibrancy that Leith brings to Edinburgh."

Continuing their creative collaboration, Mike and Fiona came up with the eye-catching Good Vibes logo together. "I've been a graphic designer for 15 years, so Fiona and I worked together to try and create something we felt was quite different. We both have a love of Seventies West Coast bohemian American culture and wanted to bring that to an industrial former working port area of Edinburgh. The logo ended up looking like a kind of psychedelic private investigator's crest – which I'm kinda into.

"I've worked in various creative agencies for about 10 years and have been freelance for the past five," he explains. "It had always been a dream of mine to run a small record shop, so being able to run Good Vibes with my wife is definitely a dream come true." He's refreshingly candid about his retail chops too. "Before the shop I had absolutely zero experience in running a record shop and working with distributors and labels so it's definitely been a trial by fire for me," he confesses. "I'm using this is as a public apology to my reps as I'm definitely a huge pain in the arse to deal with!"

"We're going to organise a big festival in the summer to celebrate our second birthday!"

Music-wise, Good Vibes is vinyl-only, selling mainly 12in records, with a smattering of 10in wax too. "As we're a small shop, our selection is a nice curated mix spread over a good combination of genres and labels," Mike explains. We only sell new releases and reissues. Our current stock is about 1,500 records."

The range is broad and reflects Mike and Fiona's eclectic tastes. In the racks, you'll find – deep breath – rock and pop; folk and country; metal of various stripes; noise; psych, kosmische and progressive rock; shoegaze; post-punk; jazz; soul; hip-hop; electronic, ambient and experimental music. "A few racks are held out for certain specialist labels we love, such as Numero Group and Athens Of The North," Mike adds.

Love is the drug

"We just love seeing people buying and engaging with the physical medium of vinyl records. Being in the shop, you get to witness their unbridled joy in discovering new, old lost-then-found-again music. My favourite moment recently was discussing Black Sabbath's masterpiece *Master Of Reality* with a nine-year-old regular who had just discovered this musical drug."

From the logo to the art on the walls, the tomes on the table and the wax in the racks, there's a psychedelic theme that spans the decades that feels like it's in Good Vibes' DNA. Guilty as charged, it seems. "Yeah, I'm a huge psych music fan, so I guess a fair bit of the curation is subconsciously bent around that," Mike explains.

There's more to it than that, however. "The shop curation is something that we still find extremely difficult to balance to this day as we love being a local record shop where you can pick up popular new releases that came out that week alongside some stone-cold classics, but we also wanted the shop to stock more obscure and potentially harder-to-find records and labels that would be a big draw for other types of customers." Mike flags cult labels such as Guruguru Brain, Freedom To Spend, Stolen Body Records, Castle Face Records, Finders Keepers and ▶

One aim for the shop is to stock more obscure and harder-to-find records

Wewantsounds "to name but a few" to illustrate his point – while also providing an excellent leaping off point for those on an insatiable quest for adventurous sounds.

"We're not actually involved in the RSD activities at the moment, simply due to the fact that we don't have the time and resources to fully commit to doing RSD properly, so we've decided to hold off until we feel confident that we can't make it an amazing event," Mike adds.

Creative space

There's an art fair feel to the space, as exquisite treats are everywhere you look. "We also stock a variety of beautiful books and objects. The books tend to be based around whatever we've been reading recently and think would be great in the shop. This ranges from feminist writings and poetry to books about black holes and the importance of drone music. Alongside this, we ship in stunning wool felt pennants from our friends Oxford Pennant in Buffalo NY and also incense from Paine's who have been running since 1931 in Maine in the US."

The Good Vibes Instagram feed is, appropriately enough, a wealth of good vibes, but when we ask Mike to share his thoughts about social media, he pulls no punches. "I find social media a brain-melting disease bag – however it's a necessary evil for the shop and it's allowed our business to grow and reach a big audience and new customers. So I have a complicated relationship with it.

"We've always been of the mind that we will let the shop grow organically. We wanted to build the shop experience first – people coming in and digging through the racks, discussing new music, books, gigs and so on, and enjoying the space, as that's the most important part of record shops to us. Over the past two years we feel like we're starting to establish ourselves and our stock, so this year we're going to launch the online part and see how it goes. The toughest part is harnessing what people like about the physical shop and somehow building that into the online version. It's going to be fun, though, and we're excited to launch it around summer this year." Watch this space…

And there's even more to look forward to: "We're looking to organise a big festival this summer to celebrate our second birthday. We're going to have bands and friends spinning records in the shop and take over the local venues. Being a pillar in the local music scene has been something we've wanted to work on since the shop's birth, but with Covid and my wife and I having our first child recently our sole focus has been keeping the shop running day to day."

When it comes to the decent Good Vibes hi-fi set up, Mike describes it as: "reasonably modest", which is indeed being modest: "This is where I worry that I'm going to be found out for not being an audiophile and kicked out the cool kids club," he laughs. "The turntable is a TEAC TN-350, which then runs through a Sony STR-DH190, which eventually reaches my favourite piece of kit: a pair of Wharfedale Denton 85 Anniversary speakers in walnut. They both look and sound stunning and completed our 'Seventies Cali' theme perfectly. We have a similar setup at home, except we have a custom piece of joinery that all the individual elements slot into perfectly. It needs to be seen to be admired fully."

"It's always been a dream of mine to run a record shop, so this is definitely a dream come true"

Good Vibes is now currently open for business two days a week – the weekend – as the couple made the decision to reduce their opening hours. It's a decision that's paying off in many positive ways. "We are strong advocates of having a great work-life balance where and when you can," Mike explains. "From doing IVF for two years, which happily resulted in the birth of our son Scout last year, we decided to reduce our opening hours to just weekends as we wanted to have as much family time as possible. We feared this may have ruined the shop… but everyone has been so overwhelmingly kind and positive about our decision, which strangely has resulted in our weekends becoming immensely busy and the shop thriving."

He adds: "We love our little shop and look forward to it growing gradually and people discovering us over time." ●

CONTACT DETAILS

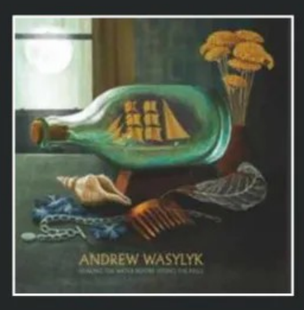
Good Vibes Neighbourhood Store & Studios
151-153 Constitution Street, Leith, Edinburgh, EH6 7AD
good-vibes.space
Instagram: goodvibesleith
Email: hello@good-vibes.space

SHOPPING LIST

Eight platters to blow your mind, all in stock at Good Vibes Neighbourhood Store, all recommended by Mike and on some of his favourite labels

Panda Bear & Sonic Boom
Reset
"One of our favourites from last year. A luscious psychedelic pop record from Noah Lennox (Panda Bear) and Peter Kember (Spacemen 3). Think The Beach Boys on mushrooms."

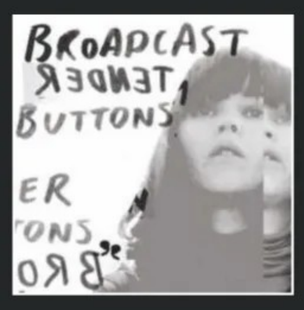
Fuzz
II
"A side project of Ty Segall on which he tries – and succeeds – to encapsulate the raw energy of Seventies heavy metal icons like Sabbath. This slaps then shreds, then slaps again."



Andrew Wasylyk
Hearing The Water Before Seeing The Falls
"A record of opulent spiritual dreamscapes, featuring guests Alabaster dePlume, Pete Harvey (Modern Studies) and photographer Thomas Joshua Cooper."

Kikagaku Moyo
Kumoyo Island
"The final release from the inspirational Japanese psych troupe and another favourite from 2022. Packed full of grooves, rich textures and supremely blissed-out jams."

François Tusques
Free Jazz
"Originally released in 1965, this incredible piece coined the phrase 'free jazz' before the American genre of the same name had fully taken shape. Stunning improvised and avant-garde music."



Broadcast
Tender Buttons
"An all-time favourite of mine. A dark, synth-fuelled psychedelic slice of hauntology from the indietronica legends. Trish Keenan's vocals still hit me in the chest every time."

Haruomi Hosono
Hosono House
"Haruomi's take on The Band's *Music From Big Pink*. To me this signifies a form of early take on 'slacker rock' due to its real loose vibe and raw recording method."

Maston
Panorama
"Commissioned by library music label KPM, Frank Maston created a dazzling and hypnotic homage to the library music and Italian film soundtracks of the Seventies."

Picture credits: Jack Alan

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Hi-fi choices

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THIS MONTH

ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Active in the industry since 1999, Ed's first record was *Boss Drum* by The Shamen. He splits his time between reviewing and protecting hi-fi kit from his son Will.

NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Neville has an eclectic taste for classical baroque and jazz. His wife was forced to marry his transmission line speakers in the eighties and he collects BBC test card music.

JASON KENNEDY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Editor of *HFC* from 1998 to 2001, Jason's first turntable was Rega's Planar 3 and Elvis' *40 Greatest Hits* was his first vinyl, so don't go stepping on his blue suede shoes.

DAVID PRICE

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

DP two-finger typed his first hi-fi review 25 years ago. Since then he's edited *Hi-Fi World* and *HFC*. He describes himself as an "unreconstructed analogue addict".

CHRIS WARD

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Like his first kiss, Chris will never forget the sound of his first amp – an Aura Evolution VA-100. *War Of The Worlds* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* were his first records.

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facebook.com/hifichoice.co.uk

Jargon buster

I have an idea for a regular feature in the magazine. I have returned to reading hi-fi mags after a few years' absence (I became a subscriber to *HFC* last October) and although I am thoroughly enjoying each edition, I get confused with the digital formats *etc*. Can you produce a glossary of terms that could be a page at the back each month? And also perhaps a feature about the formats for those like me who are also struggling to decode the shorthand.

Also, a bit of advice please. I want to change my amplifier and CD player (Quad Vena and Exposure 1010), and have a budget of £1,500. I only listen to CD and downloads via my iPod and Bluetooth. I was thinking of the Roksan Attessa amp and transport or the Audiolab 6000 amp and transport. I use Focal Spirit Classic headphones for serious listening and also have DALI Spector 2 standmounts.

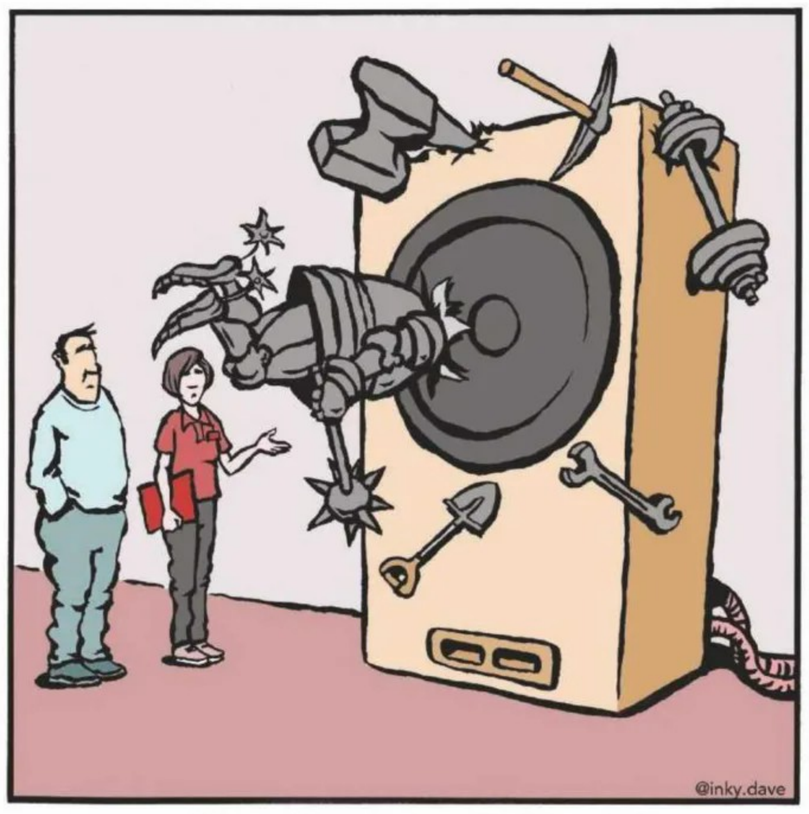
Martin Brooks, by email

SS: You're not alone in your bafflement Martin. Every month it seems some new terminology springs up to get us scratching our heads and other readers have similarly remarked that they could do with a bit of assistance in decoding the jargon. Rest assured, we're busy devising an updatable Glossary which we can regularly publish so we can all keep abreast. That's coming soon but, in the meantime, next month's *Beginner's Guide* will be dealing with digital music and streaming so hopefully that'll go some way to helping you see the wood for the trees.

***DP*:** To my ears at least, the new Roksan Attessa integrated sounds considerably better than the Audiolab, with a warmer, punchier and more musical sound, and also your Quad Vena. At the same time, the Audiolab is a good, clean and tidy performer. You may wish to keep your Exposure CD player if the mechanism is reading discs perfectly and save up a wee bit more cash for the excellent Chord Qutest DAC (*HFC* 436, £1,400). This sounds better than any DAC bundled inside an amplifier, and all its rivals too. It will also stand you in good stead should you decide to get a streamer.

***ES*:** Talented as the Audiolab is, I feel that the Roksan is the stronger offering here; it's a lovely amp and BluOS is tractable, flexible and easy to use as well. If you can live without everything matching, the Audiolab transport (or the Cambridge Audio CXC) will work well too and save you a few quid into the bargain. At the time of writing, I've yet to hear the new Audiolab 7000A Play, which I suspect will be very good but the Roksan is a known quantity and I do prefer BluOS to DTS Play – so I'd still give the Roksan the nod.

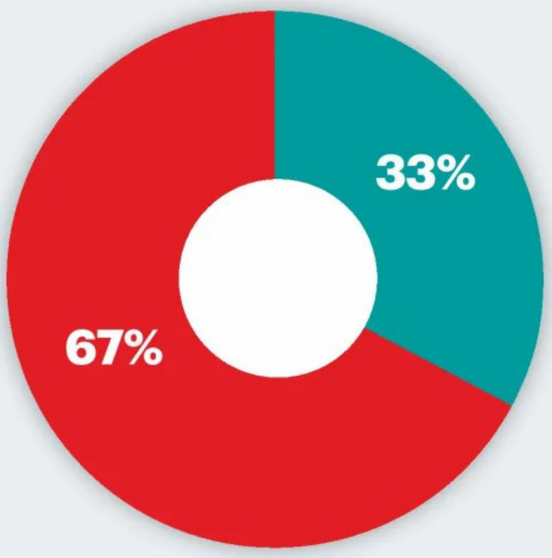
OHM-SWEET-OHM



"Powerful magnets in this unit"

WE ASKED...

Do you use a power amplifier in your setup?



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Hear hear!

At 68, I've noticed a fair bit of hearing loss over the last five years or so. Coinciding with that has been a renewed interest in hi-fi, but I suspect that my best hearing days are behind me, and that searches for the holy grail in equipment may prove to be a waste of time and money. I had my hearing checked and

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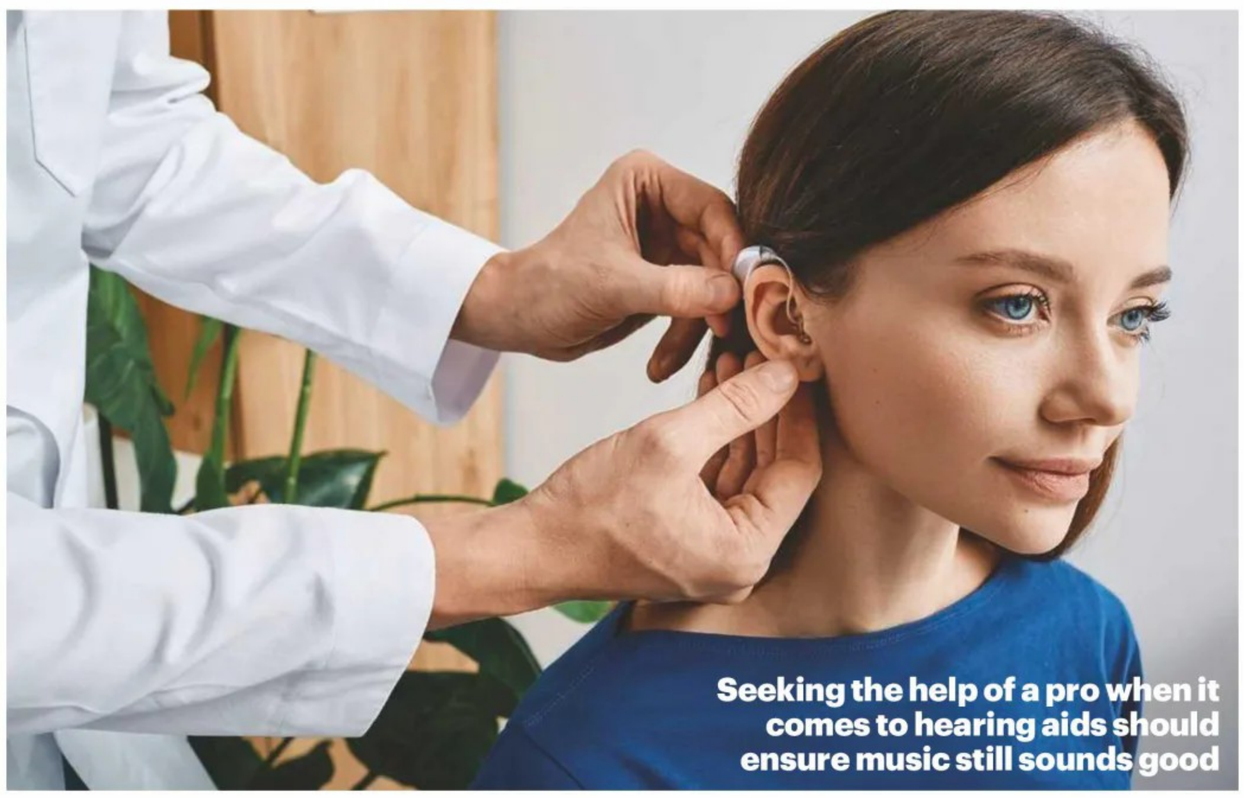

Seeking the help of a pro when it comes to hearing aids should ensure music still sounds good

there's not much above 5kHz. How much of 'enjoying hi-fi' is reliant on having extended hearing? I have a variety of equipment (Cambridge Audio, Yamaha, Rotel and B&W speakers) from the lower end of the price spectrum.

As I read your magazine lusting after the latest piece of wizardry, I am left wondering if better equipment would sound much different.

Neil Macpherson, by email

NR: I have a couple of years on you Neil and like most people in our age group, the hearing from our ears really starts to drop at frequencies above 4-5kHz. Although one would think that would mean the end of enjoying hi-fi music, this is certainly not the case. Our brain makes adjustments to the signals it gets from our ears, plus it adds sound information that is picked up by our cranium, our stomach and even our eyeballs (according to NASA)! However, don't take my word for it – go and audition some higher-end equipment for yourself – I am certain that you'll be pleasantly surprised by what you hear.

JK: I'm with Neville and think you might be surprised at how much difference you can hear. The vast majority of important information in music is in the midrange, which is roughly between 200Hz and 3.5kHz. I often argue that the older we get the more we need decent systems to compensate for hearing loss, so would recommend you get yourself to a dealer and see if they can demonstrate something worthwhile upgrading to.

DP: Music exists both in the frequency domain and the time domain. Hearing roll-off over 5kHz, which isn't that untypical for someone of your age, isn't going to impact your appreciation of the rhythmic elements of music one bit. Also, there's an awful lot of stuff to be heard below 5kHz too, and pyschoacoustics teaches us that the brain can work around the loss of musical information providing it has access to the fundamentals – just look at how MP3 and other compressed formats work, to appreciate that. So I'd say that – while you may not be able to hear the shimmering harmonics of a hard-struck hi-hat cymbal any more – you are still able to enjoy music. It's great for your mood and sense of well being, so give it all you've got!

CW: As Neville mentions, human senses are way more complex than science has yet to fully explain and while the measurable performance of your eardrums may be lower, the

The older we get, the more we need good hi-fi to compensate for hearing loss

human brain is incredible at still deriving the correct information. It's a little-known fact, but your sense of hearing is not solely based on your ears. Your skin, the hairs on your body and pressure on your eyeballs are all understood to play a component part of how sound waves and air pressure are interpreted. I must also underline it is important to explore how hearing aids have advanced in recent years. While some introduce a degree of extra digital intervention that may get in the way of your analogue enjoyment, some are reported to make a very positive difference. I'd recommend speaking to experienced audiologists for advice as well as taking the counsel of some music lovers who've already wrestled this challenge. ▶

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High-quality tape can deliver an impressive listening experience

Reel gone kid

I note with interest that Neville has started reviewing reel-to-reel tapes and often mentions in his column the tape revival. I've not seen any sign of this in my local hi-fi dealer, but looking online the prices are really high – who pays a couple of hundred quid for an album?!

What's the deal with it? Why is it so expensive and how does it compare with CD or vinyl?

Mike Bull, Northumberland

NR: Unfortunately, Mike, open-reel professional tape is not cheap. Part of the reason for this is that the media is relatively expensive due to the demands of the professional market – large tapes to support playback at 15IPS and metal spools and NAB hubs. Also, the copy process from the masters is made in real time, whereas back in the heyday of domestic open-reel tape and cassettes, duplication was done at high speed to keep costs down, but at the expense of sound quality. What you get with a copy-master is a copy from the production master – usually the same generation that would be sent to vinyl pressing plants (and from which domestic 4-track tapes at 7.5IPS and cassettes would have been made in the past) – this results in a studio quality master that will out-perform even vinyl and certainly CD and other media. That is why the tapes are expensive, so it is therefore unlikely that, in this country at least, your local hi-fi dealer will stock pro-tapes and machines. Nevertheless, if you are into high-end audio and have one of the professional half-track stereo machines needed to play the tapes, it is really worthwhile IMHO as it is the best source possible, apart from attending the live performance. Be warned: once you have experienced the huge dynamics and realism of a master tape, there's no going back!

What you get is a studio-quality master that will out-perform vinyl

CW: Some of the prices of new tapes are a little steamy, but of course the volume of listeners is smaller, so there are few economies of scale. For me, the magic of reel-to-reel tape is hearing a sound that places me at a mixing desk listening to a live feed from a performer behind a studio window. It's not that the resolution of the tape is superior per se, it's more that it sounds 'live' and potentially has never entered the digital domain at all.

ES: A good friend of mine once described reel-to-reel as a: "bottomless pit of faff, expense and hiss". While possibly a little harsh, it's not without merit. High-quality tape running at decent speeds can deliver an impressive listening experience that will comfortably outperform vinyl, buuuut… you have a choice of a machine that predates the Thatcher government or a new one that costs as much as truly high-end turntable. Then, as you note, you have a far smaller choice of material to listen to at a vastly higher price. As someone born in 1980, the amount of music younger than me that has a tape release can be counted on the fingers of one knee, which rather limits the appeal. It's potentially one of the most 'hi-fi' listening experiences there is, but the caveats are significant.

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PMC's twenty5.23i is nearly as open as an electrostatic and can deliver impressive detail

Excitement needed

We have been very pleased with our system over the past 10-15 years, having decided early on to stick with CD but getting the best possible 'analogue' sound within the constraints of our budget. Our system comprises an Audio Analogue Maestro CD player (laser and transport recently replaced) linked through a Whest Audio DAP.10 analogue processor to Quad 99 pre and power amps driving a pair of Quad ESL 2805 electrostatic speakers, supplemented with a REL Storm 5 sub. Cabling and interconnects chopped and changed over the years help the system deliver a detailed, clear and easy to live with sound suited to our predominantly Sixties to Nineties rock-pop tastes in a room that is 6.5 x 5.5 x 2.4m.

So – to the dilemma… In anticipation of downsizing at some point, we would like to reclaim some of the space taken up by the electrostatics and would welcome your ideas on a suitable pair of standmounts or floorstanders, capable of sounding not too dissimilar to the Quads. If we had any criticism of them, it would be that despite their unmatched lack of colouration, we think they tend to produce a slightly 'dry', studio monitor type of sound, lacking in overall excitement? We recently upgraded our second, study system with a pair of Dynaudio Emit 10 speakers, and although no match for our main system, the Dynaudios do seem to give that bit of added excitement we would be looking for. Is there anything in the Dynaudio range, or a comparable suggestion, that you would recommend? Our budget would be to a maximum of £4,000.

We look forward to receiving your expert advice.

Richard Kelly, Isle of Anglesey

We're down-sizing can you suggest a replacement for our electrostatics?

***JK*:** That's an enviable system in a decent-sized room you have there Richard. While there are plenty of speakers that will give you more excitement, you will have to trade in some of the transparency that the electrostatics specialise in. The PMC twenty5.23i (*HFC* 473) is a relatively compact floorstander that might suit your needs, it should be nearly as open as the Quads and is capable of delivering impressive levels of detail. If you'd like a richer sound, I can recommend the Coppice Audio X1 standmount.

***DP*:** One common criticism of Quad electrostatics is that they're tonally dry, and the clean and precise solid-state sound of the 99 power amp won't help in this respect ether. So if I were you I'd go for a standmount speaker that errs

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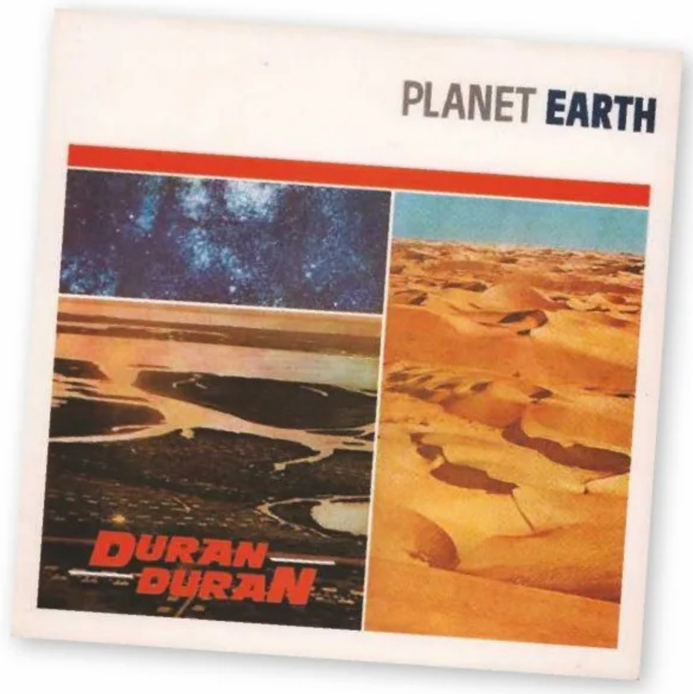
ever so slightly into 'warm' territory – although one that's not obviously coloured. As you're a big Dynaudio fan, then the Contour 20i (£4,500) is the obvious choice. I reviewed its predecessor (*HFC* 421), which was absolutely superb – a very musically enjoyable mid-price standmount. Another great speaker in a similar vein is Neat's Majistra (p34), which has the benefit of a ribbon tweeter which gives a super-seamless Quad-style midband and treble. It's another super-sounding design and arguably a little underpriced for what it does.

CW: This is a tricky challenge. You've put together a great system and your request is based upon a downsizing move that hasn't happened yet. I am a firm believer that you need to wait until you are in a new space before designing the next solution. I also have a sneaking suspicion that few speakers will equal the speed of your current electrostatics. Any dryness that you describe is probably the micro-dynamic musical information and essential transients that you may actually be addicted to. When the time for any downsizing comes, see if Cadence Avita (*HFC* 396) hybrid electrostatics are available in the UK. I reckon they will be your perfect speaker choice.

ES: I don't regard there being much crossover between the sound of Dynaudio and a Quad ESL, but they are fantastic speakers. Something that might work as a halfway house, though, are the Neat Majistra or Orkestra (*HFC* 473). These are fluid and engaging-sounding speakers and, thanks to the use of a ribbon tweeter and careful cabinet design, are impressively unboxy in their presentation. This would be where I'd start looking if I wanted to find a bridge between the two contrasts you have in the house.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Musical youth



I read with interest Steve Sutherland's *Opinion* piece *The kids are alright* (*HFC* 499) and have got to say that I agree wholeheartedly with him. We do embrace and keep the music of our youth with us.

The first record I purchased with my own money was *Planet Earth* by Duran Duran and I'm still buying their albums today. I am currently rebuilding my Depeche Mode vinyl that I gave away for reasons that are lost to me. It's the same with my Tidal account, which apart from classical, opera and some Yorkshire folk music (check out Serious Sam Barrett) it's mainly the two bands I've mentioned along with Terrorvision and Echobelly from the Nineties that make up a large chunk of my playlists.

Roll on May when I'll be reliving my youth once again at the Leeds Arena singing my heart out to Duran Duran!

Steven Batty, by email

SS: Great letter Steve. Now pretty much every piece of music recorded is easily available to discover, I reckon the only thing better than turning someone else on to a personal fave is being turned on yourself by someone else's recommendation. That's what I like about our *Cool Collection* feature on the *Music Review* pages – I always find it fascinating what tracks great musicians hold dear.

What d'you think about us starting a readers' *Cool Collection* column to share even more good music? Send us a few words on three albums you love (plus a picture of yourself) and let's see if we can get something up and running. I'm off to give Serious Sam Barrett a listen...

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System matching

Why finding the perfect synergy between your chosen integrated amplifier and favourite speakers holds the key to maximising your system's potential

Just because you like the taste of chicken and think that custard is delicious doesn't mean that they will go together well in a sandwich. And the world of hi-fi is no different. When it comes to system building, it's not quite as simple as picking any old integrated and hooking it up to the biggest, loudest speakers you can find. In short, you'll never get the best out of your amp if you're forcing it to huff and puff driving unsuitable speakers, and neither will you hear your speakers sing with an amplifier that was chosen without due thought and consideration as to whether or not it can drive them properly.

To get the synergy right between the two you need to consider the physics. Speakers are transducers that convert electrical energy from your amp into a physical form. How much sound they are able to produce (the amount of air that they shift), depends on a number of things.

Sensitivity is the amount of sound that a speaker produces from a given amount of power. This is a function of the drive unit design and the cabinet loading type, plus the size of the cabinet. These factors should be given consideration by anyone thinking about matching a speaker to an amplifier.

Conventional drive units come in a variety of designs, some have powerful, efficient magnets and motors and others don't. From a buyer's viewpoint these aren't easy to tell apart, but one thing to consider is the cone material. This has a direct impact on sound – heavier materials will need more power to move the same amount of air. By contrast, paper is light so needs less power. Kevlar along with carbon fibre, glass fibre and aerogel, also ensures that a speaker is able to convert power to sound efficiently.

One of the main factors that determines sensitivity is the type of cabinet loading employed by the speaker. Many speakers are reflex ported. Ports allow drive units to move air more easily, in general terms giving higher sound levels for each watt of power fed in. Some designers choose infinite baffle cabinets, where the box is sealed. This can give a tighter bass, but tends to drink up more power. So as a general rule, it's better to match lower-powered amps to reflex-ported loudspeakers, while infinite baffle speakers require a big powerful amp.

More speakers are damaged by amps that aren't powerful enough than the other way round

Whatever the type of cabinet loading used in the speaker, the larger the internal volume of the cabinet, the easier it can move air. That's why large speakers tend to be more sensitive. So it's fair to say that, all other things being equal, a large reflex-ported speaker with good modern drive units and light cones will produce higher sound levels for the same amount of power than a small, infinite baffle type with less efficient drivers. This is the key point to keep in mind when choosing speakers for your amp.

It's not just the components that make your system sound good, it's how they interact.

The secret's in the matching. So, before you even think of amplifier power as being a guide to how loud your system will go, you must consider sensitivity. The standard method of measuring speaker sensitivity is to state the sound pressure level that they generate (in units called dBA) at a distance of one metre from one watt of input power. Although it is seldom stated, the test frequency is a 1kHz midband tone, which is assumed to be a fair frequency where the speaker is likely to be even.

If you use valve amps, you'll likely need a speaker of at least 89dB or more sensitivity to get more than a squeak. So it will probably be a large, ported design. Conversely, if you want small speakers, you'll need a big, powerful transistor amplifier capable of at least 60W per channel or more.

Power matters

Effectively then, the more power your amp has, the less important speaker sensitivity is, as one compensates for the other. That's why most people running modern transistor amplifiers of a medium power output can run most loudspeakers without issue. But smaller amps in big rooms will still find it helpful to opt for more efficient speakers. A typical figure for an average loudspeaker is 86 to 88dBA/1W/1m, and this will go loud with an amp rated at around 25W or more.

There's more to amplifier power figures than meets the eye, though. Every buyer has to suffer the ordeal of the numbers game, but how do you decipher claimed power output figures, and how do they work in practice? They provide a useful insight into what the amp's got inside it, especially when you read between the lines. Specialist hi-fi manufacturers will quote amplifier power output figures into differing speaker impedances, the norm being 8ohm. It's important to remember, this is just a 'line in the sand', as no loudspeaker presents an 8ohm load to the amplifier at all times; its impedance is constantly varying up and down along with output frequencies across the audio band. That's why it's useful to check the amount of power it claims to put into 4 and even 2ohm loads. Amplifiers that have well-designed power supplies will deliver almost twice as much power into half the load, so 20W into 8ohm becomes 40W into 4 and 80W into 2. Very few actually do this, but the closer an amplifier gets to this, the more it's able to drive 'real-world' speakers, rather than just a steady state test tone on a test bench.

The other side of this is the impedance load that the loudspeaker presents to the amplifier. Many designs quote a nominal impedance figure of 8ohm, but this varies with the music. An amp that puts out twice as much power into 4ohm is going to sound stronger and more stable and have a better grip on the speaker. With a big transistor amplifier that (nearly) does this, you don't have to worry about your speaker's quoted impedance quite so much – it isn't critical.

Conversely, using 8ohm speakers with an amp specified for 4ohm speakers will result in a reduction in numerical power output, but this is seldom noticeable in practice. The situation is more critical with valve amplifiers due to the low power levels that can be achieved, even under ideal conditions. Typically with these designs, a choice of speaker terminals is fitted offering different impedances (called 'taps'), and these should be used correctly.

Another important thing to consider is your loudspeaker's power rating, although this isn't quite so critical in practice. A loudspeaker rated at 150W does not imply you need a 150W amplifier to drive it or that it will fail if 151W are applied. It is, however, a basic guide indicating the scale of amp that the manufacturers had in mind when designing the speaker. So try to pick one which is, at least, within a factor of two of the power of your amplifier. It is interesting to note that more speakers are damaged by amps that are not powerful enough, rather than the other way round because when an amp runs out of puff it starts to generate a lot of distortion, which then passes straight through the crossover filters and damages

Reflex-ported speakers are better suited to lower powered amps

Solid-state amps are easier to match than valve-based ones

Effectively, the more power your amplifier has, the less important speaker sensitivity is

the tweeters. That's why some speaker makers quote a minimum amp power rating. Remember: power rating does not give a direct indication of how much sound the speaker will generate with a given amplifier – sensitivity is a better indication of this.

Finally, it's important to consider damping factor. This is the name given to the ratio between the speaker impedance and the amp's output resistance. If the damping factor is too low, the amp won't be able to position the speaker cones accurately and resonances will colour the sound – the speakers begin to affect the way the amp works electrically. Sometimes this leads to a pleasant increase in perceived warmth, but it can often lead to boomy, 'one-note' bass.

Poor damping is the Achilles' heel of valve amplifiers, which is why good matching is so critical. The damping factor of valve amplifiers tends to be low – between 0.5 and 5 for many of the current models. Transistor amps can give colossal damping factors. Powerful transistor amplifiers with high damping factors are more able to give predictable results with 'peaky' speakers that exhibit large impedance changes across the audio band, while tube amps need more even-natured speakers to give their best.

Match maker

All this is related to the amplifier's output impedance – the higher this is, the greater the variation in system response will occur, reflecting swings in the speaker's impedance curve. In some quarters, the subjective impact of the output impedance on perceived bass performance is less of an issue. Ultimately, the only way you can really be sure your speaker is electrically well matched to your amp is to listen to it, which underlines what we always say – get to know a good dealer and audition your desired kit with a range of different types of music before parting with any cash ●

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The art of the classical DJ

Hosting programmes of classical music on the radio requires quite different skills to those needed for hosting pop or light music programmes says ***Neville Roberts***

My love of classical music can be traced back to my childhood and my music teacher at junior school, a Mr Covey-Crump, who often played us a record or two during his lessons on his Dansette portable record player. One time he played us Benjamin Britten's 1945 *Young Person's Guide To The Orchestra*. It is most probably this early exposure to classical music that kick started my love of baroque music. Whether I would have grown fond of it had it not been for Mr Covey-Crump, I will never know. He was always friendly and my music lessons with him were a highlight in my week.

This leads me to conclude that the personality of a radio presenter is an important part of the audience's overall experience, and it is often the host of a programme who attracts (or otherwise) listeners and encourages them to tune in. When it comes to playing records on the radio, it is not simply a case of introducing the music. It is their job to provide a connection between audience and music.

An example of the latter would be the music played on the BBC Radio 3 Breakfast programme, which I used to listen to during my daily commute to work. Very often, Rob Cowan, Sara Mohr-Pietsch or Petroc Trelawny would introduce a piece which was new to me and offer some insight into its background or the composer. The host's energy and obvious enthusiasm really drew me into the music that was subsequently played, and if I particularly liked it I would make a mental note to track it down when I returned home, and I often ended up buying the LP. When I think of the voices and personalities of these classical music hosts, I appreciate just how important their role has been in shaping my own listening habits.

Good hosts create a connection with the audience and never promote themselves

I recently read an article on classical music hosts that quoted the Chief Content Officer and Senior Vice President at New York's WQXR radio, Ed Yim. WQXR-FM, which is owned by the non-profit organisation New York Public Radio, is an American non-commercial classical radio station serving the North Jersey and New York City area. Yim said that human connection and curation beats any algorithm for experiencing art. He considers that WQXR's mission is not to simply be the best radio station, but to engage people, both the passionate and the curious, in the music. I believe this to be true for all classical music radio.

Music radio stations like WQXR in the US, Radio 3 and Classic FM all have devoted listeners and these listeners are the target market for the recordings that are played.

Being a good DJ is so much more than just saying what's about to be played

The job of the hosts is to curate the music in order to educate and entertain the audience. Naturally, when presenters showcase new recordings to listeners, the record companies and performers also benefit. In order to carry out their role effectively, the hosts have to be well educated in music. This was certainly true of the BBC Radio 3 presenters, whose lineup includes graduates, musicians and scholars.

Effective communication

It's one thing to be knowledgeable, but another altogether to be able to communicate this effectively to the listener. Communicating to a mixed audience of devoted followers and those who are simply dipping their toes in the water is quite an art in itself. It is all about striking a balance between not trying to teach a knowledgeable listener how to suck eggs and not talking over the head of the more casual one. Good hosts create a connection with the audience and never seek to promote themselves as highly educated scholars, nor do they talk down to their audience. When all is said and done, whatever your background, you are listening to the radio to be entertained and if the host fails to do that, people will simply tune to another channel, or switch off. Unfortunately, too many very knowledgeable people don't possess the necessary communication skills and they use an excessive amount of jargon and 'in-house' expressions.

The radio stations I have mentioned are fortunate indeed to have hosts who are very knowledgeable, possess great communication skills and don't pepper their talk with unnecessary catch phrases ●

NEVILLE ROBERTS
Classically trained

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Old boys network

As the lineups start to emerge for this summer's festivals, ***Nigel Williamson*** investigates where the problem lies for the continuing dearth of female headliners

With the summer festival and tour season almost upon us, the old gods are getting ready to leave the stage. Elton John and Kiss are playing their final farewell jaunts in 2023 and as the Rolling Stones' celebrate their 60th anniversary, this really could be the last time.

Younger deities are already taking their place. Among the biggest ticket sellers in 2023 are Ed Sheeran and Harry Styles, and the passing of the old guard has clearly not lessened the demand for live music. Yet it seems some things never change. Before the pandemic shut down live music, I wrote in these pages about the 'Keychange pledge', in which 72 UK festivals signed up to achieve gender parity across their lineups by 2022.

To their credit, some have achieved it, although it has largely been done by packing the lower echelons of the bill on smaller stages with female acts. When it comes to the headliners, it is still predominantly an all-boy's club.

Glastonbury, which committed to gender equality, will be headlined this year by a bloke-fest of Arctic Monkeys on Friday night, Guns N' Roses on Saturday and Elton on Sunday in his final UK date before he retires.

Several other festivals including Latitude, End of the Road, All Points East and TRNSMT have no women headlining in 2023. Last year, a report found that 87 percent of the headliners at the top 50 festivals were male.

I'm acutely aware that every album I've reviewed this month is by men

Emily Eavis, in charge of booking the acts at Glastonbury, has pointed the finger at the wider music industry for failing to develop female talent. "We try our best and we aim for 50:50," she explains: "But the pipeline needs to be developed. This starts way back with the record companies and radio. I can shout as loud as I like, but we need to get everyone on board."

Of the 21 available headlining slots at Glasto over the past decade, only three have been allotted to female acts – Florence & The Machine (who got the chance when Foo Fighters pulled out after Dave Grohl broke his leg), Adele in 2016 and Billie Eilish in 2022. Potential headliners such as Taylor Swift, Rihanna and Madonna have never played.

Whether Ukraine Aid at Wembley on 24 June will be better balanced is unclear. At the time of writing the bill had not been announced, although the Rolling Stones and U2 are reported to be top of the organisers' wishlist.

Eavis' suggestion that the lack of female headliners is a: "pipeline problem" may sound like deflection, but there is considerable evidence that she has a point. A 2019 report titled *Counting The Music Industry* by researcher Vick Bain revealed that 86 percent of songwriters signed to 106 UK music publishers were male and women made up under 20 percent of the acts signed to 219 British record labels.

Wet Leg were one of the highlights of Glastonbury last year

These figures fly in the face of the fact that half of all music performance degree students are women and it prompted Bain to set up The F-List as an online directory of female and gender minority musicians to play at festivals.

Pick and mix

"It is a fact that many female musicians do not receive the professional opportunities their male counterparts may enjoy," she says. "Women are far less likely to be picked up by an A&R, far less likely to be invested in, far less likely to get a manager or an agent and all of these things mean you're less likely to be chosen to play on festival stages."

In turn this means that female artists are less likely to feature on the cover of music magazines. As a result the invisibility of female performers entrenches and perpetrates itself behind the excuse that it is merely a reflection of the market and what sells. And yes, I'm acutely aware that every artist I have written about this month is male, although Stevie Nicks is in *Flashback* (p126).

One solution is for the boys to stand in solidarity as The 1975 have done by declaring that they will only play festivals with gender-balanced lineups. "This is how male artists can be true allies," the band's Matt Healy tweeted. "It's all about action and it's something that if everyone gets on board, we can fix."

He's right and every part of the industry's ecosystem has a responsibility from festival organisers to talent agents, label executives, producers and even those of us who make a living writing about music ●

NIGEL WILLIAMSON
Girl power

Picture credit: Hollie Fernando

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Game on!

At times the hi-fi and gaming industries might seem like they're worlds apart, but ***Cliff Joseph*** reckons they both share a love of high-quality sound

It's not easy being an audiophile. Often dismissed as pretentious and having more money than sense, we're a downtrodden minority in a tech industry that values 4K video and 3D eye-candy over audio quality. We're even lower on the foodchain than wine enthusiasts.

Sometimes, though, kinship can come from unexpected quarters, and the ever-growing gaming industry has quietly begun to introduce hi-fi sound and equipment to millions of people who wouldn't normally identify as audiophile. That trend had already begun before the Coronavirus pandemic, and the sheer size of the gaming industry – matching film and music combined – has tempted many traditional headphone manufacturers to get a piece of the action.

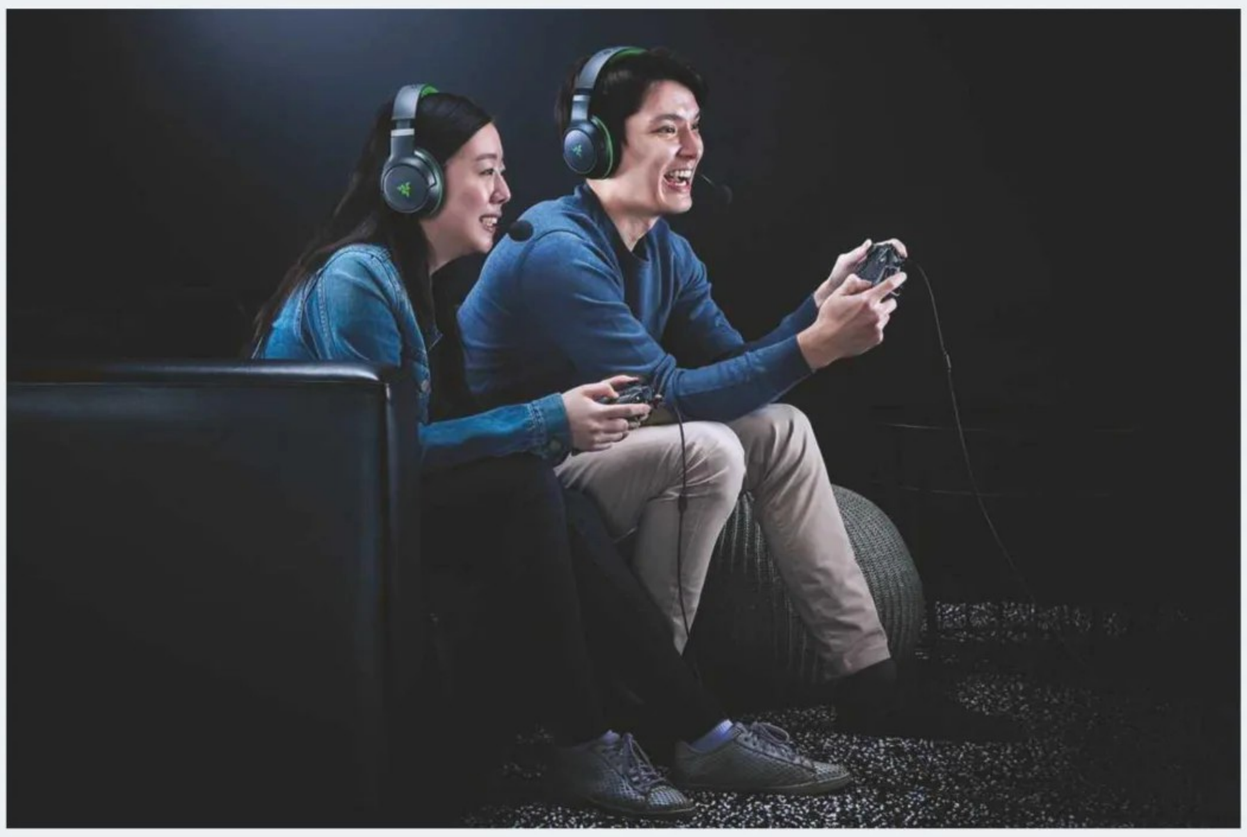
Companies such as Beyerdynamic, Audio-Technica, Yamaha and Master & Dynamic have all released gaming headsets in recent years. The lower end of the market is dominated by bargain-basement Bluetooth cans, so these audiophile manufacturers have mostly concentrated on high-end options with superior sound quality.

Somewhere along the way, the gaming specialists and hi-fi manufacturers seem to have met in the middle, establishing a price range for high-end gaming headsets somewhere between £250 and £500. Razer is one of the world's best-known gaming companies, and its Barracuda Pro headset will set you back somewhere around £250, while Master & Dynamic's MG20 costs £430 and employs Beryllium drivers and wired and wireless inputs rivalling the models we review in these pages every month.

It's odd that games haven't embraced Dolby Atmos like the film industry

Surround sound is the Trojan horse for high-quality headphones in the gaming market. Action games require a precise sense of space so you can navigate your way across a chaotic battlefield or hear an opponent as they attempt to creep up behind you. Strong bass output that will work well for dance music is equally effective for online action with the rumble of artillery exploding all around, while clear, precise vocal delivery is vital for team games where you need to communicate with other players.

Headphones that provide an open, ambient soundstage are ideal for immersing yourself in the vast online worlds created by these games. You need rich, clear sound and a good sense of space for the orchestral soundtrack of an open-world game like Amazon's *New World*, complete with twittering birdsong and rippling streams as you traverse the game's rolling countryside (and, to be honest, the soundtrack is one of the best things about playing it). The MG20 earns its keep here, with the ability to create virtual surround sound effects that simulate 5.1 and 7.1 surround sound systems, while Razer's Barracuda also supports 7.1 surround sound via THX's Spatial Audio software. It's odd, perhaps, that games haven't embraced Dolby Atmos to the same extent as the film industry, so Atmos largely remains the preserve of speakers and soundbars that are aimed at home cinema setups, but many games do have multi-channel soundtracks that can benefit from surround sound support on headphones.



Gaming cans like these ones from Razer have more in common with hi-fi than you might imagine

Picture credit: Razer

DAC's entertainment

It's not just headphones that have got a boost from gaming, either. Many gaming companies are now selling DACs. Creative Technology introduced 16-bit sound to PCs in the Nineties with its SoundBlaster cards and now sells a range of SoundBlaster DACs for gamers. These aren't cheap and cheerful either – the latest SoundBlaster X5 costs £270 and provides dual-DACs and support for 32-bit/384KHz audio, along with 3.5mm and 4.4mm outputs for balanced headphones and an impressive range of in and outputs. And Razer is so committed to high-quality sound that it bought THX in 2016, and now sells the MQA-compatible THX Onyx DAC (£200). Even Astell&Kern is getting in on the action, including microphone support in its latest HC3 DAC, designed for use with gaming headsets. In many cases, the owners of these headsets and DACs may not even realise they're using audiophile equipment – but as we all know, once you get a taste of hi-fi sound there isn't any going back ●

CLIFF JOSEPH
Gameboy

Fandemonium

Cleaning his teeth with his Bay City Rollers toothbrush and popping on his Spice Girls jim-jams, ***Steve Sutherland*** calls out artists who pressure fans into buying rubbish merch

There's been a lot of fuss recently about the extortionate fees closed-shop companies like Ticketmaster surreptitiously foist upon folks buying tickets to see their favourite bands. While an investigation is going on in America at glacial speed into the legality of TM's purchase of promoters Live Nation, effectively creating a monopoly on the ticket market, some artists have decided to take a stand.

The Cure's Robert Smith recently informed his fanbase that tickets to the band's US tour would be reasonably priced only to declare himself "sickened" by astronomical handling charges *etc.* that TM applied to every purchase. He kicked up a stink and the company kind of backed down, offering a $10 "good will" refund to all buyers.

What was interesting in all this was that Smith revealed that it is the artist's prerogative not to participate in such nefarious schemes as dynamic pricing – where the company sets the ticket price higher as demand increases – and that got me wondering about how much say our musical heroes have in customer care.

When companies advertise gambling or booze in the media, there's a legal caveat that they must tell us to drink or bet sensibly, but what about those impressionable fans increasingly tempted by must-have merchandise?

Those of us deeply devoted to a particular artist can be fleeced and sucked dry financially for our undying affection. It doesn't matter whether you're a long-in-the-tooth completist like a mate of mine who collects all things Iron Maiden and will buy all manner of new product variations featuring Eddie The Head or whether you're a younger Harry Styles fan excited over an impending release, we're all under intolerable pressure to buy, buy, buy!

Who needs all this crap and what are we supposed to do with it anyway?

Here's a current example. I love Lana Del Rey and, on the release of her latest work of genius, *Did You Know There's A Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*, her website was offering a series of increasing costly 'bundles'. The first offered a brass whistle (!), green cassette with alternative cover number 4 and CD with alternative cover number 3 for £33. The second had a lilac T shirt, CD with alternative cover number 2 and a black cassette with alternative cover number 3, for £39. The next lot featured the album as an "exclusive" double white vinyl LP in yet another alternative cover plus – and I kid you not – brass pill case and a white cassette with alternative cover number 1. That little lot came to £52.

You're not a true fan if you haven't got a whistle...

Hey, come back, we're not done yet. Not by a long chalk. There's a double LP picture disc at £33, the lilac T-shirt at £29 and an alternative T at the same price. You can get the whistle, if you want it, for £22 and the brass pill case on its tod for the same price. You can get CD number 1 and cassette number 1 in another bundle for £16 or CD 2 and cassette 3 together or CD 3 and cassette 4 for the same price. Then there's the four-CD bundle with all the alternative covers for £34, a bundle of all five tapes (grey, white, red, black and green, in alternative covers) for £36.

Next-level fandom

But should I wish to show Lana that I really love her more than all the other so-called fans, say hello to the "Superfan bundle" which is the white vinyl double, all the CDs and all the cassettes, yours for a trifling £123. I could go on and tell you about the brass lighter, Candy necklace, T-shirt in black, hoodie and the £100 racing jacket with patches, but I think you get the idea. Who needs all this crap and what are we supposed to do with it anyway?

Lana Del Rey promotes herself as a sensitive artist who cares deeply about the world and her fans and what they think of her, so why all this merch which is surely a drain on the world and her fans' resources? It's no excuse to blame her record company for this manifestation of naked greed. She can just put a stop to it with one word. No.

It's just preying on the vulnerable and while we have the choice not to buy any of it, the irresponsible implication in "superfan" is that if we don't buy we don't care. At the bottom left hand corner of her website, ironically enough, there's a button. It says: "Help & Support". We're gonna need it. They don't call us vinyl junkies for nothing ●

STEVE SUTHERLAND
Fanning the flames

Rothwell

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The first phonostage from Rothwell
was unveiled back in 1990. In those days even the concept of an outboard phonostage was unknown to most audiophiles, though of course it's commonplace now. There were very few, if any, on the market then, and the first Rothwell phonostage was well ahead of its time. It was a valve design with a separate and substantial power supply, and it had adjustable load resistance and capacitance – ideas which were adopted only years later by others. 30 years on, Rothwell phonostages are still different from the many me-too offerings. All the designs, from entry-level to the top-of-the-range, are totally discrete transistor circuits without any op-amps at all, and they're all still made in the UK.
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Thanks to Doug Brady Hi-fi for their continuing support and for the use of their dem room featured in the picture.

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89 **The Handel Project**
Handel 3 Suites; Brahms Handel Variations
Seong-Jin Cho

90 **Everything But The Girl**
Fuse

92 **Walter Smith III**
Return To Casual

Musicreviews

ALBUM OF THE MONTH

Tinariwen
Amatssou

★★★★★

CD **Warp**

IN JANUARY 2001, I was lucky enough to travel to see Tinariwen play under a total eclipse of the moon at "the world's remotest music festival" in the southern Sahara in Mali to a crowd of sword-wielding Tuareg warriors on camels and a handful of curious westerners.

In what was their first review in the UK media, I enthused about the strange and otherworldly nature of their "raw and earthy" songs, full of unusual time signatures and snaking electric guitars, and suggested that rock music had never heard anything quite like them.

Since then, their desert blues has become a familiar fixture. The band has toured the globe, cranking up the guitars and the loping grooves to meet the demands of playing to rock audiences at Glastonbury and Coachella. Their albums have featured collaborations with a host of western rock stars including members of TV On The Radio, Wilco and Red Hot Chilli Peppers without compromising the authenticity of their tribal beat.

Over eight albums the sound that once seemed so exotic has been absorbed into the fabric of alternative rock – which has been great to behold, but at the cost of Tinariwen losing their erstwhile capacity to surprise us. Nobody wants them to turn into a grime act or to start yelping like the White Stripes, but it was surely time to tweak the core sound and add a different nuance or two.

On *Amatssou* they've achieved that spectacularly while still sounding authentically like Tinariwen. At the invitation of Jack White, the original plan was to record in Nashville with country musicians and producer Daniel Lanois, whose credits include U2 and Bob Dylan, and explore the shared traditions of cowboys of the Old West and Tuareg desert nomads singing songs of loss and longing around a campfire. In the event, lockdown meant they could not fly and instead Lanois and his musicians planned to make the trip in the opposite direction to record on Tinariwen's home territory in the Sahara – only for that plan to be scuppered when the producer went down with Covid. Eventually *Amatssou* was assembled long-distance, Tinariwen recording in a tent in the Algerian desert, the country musicians Fats Kaplin and Wes Corbett recording in Nashville and Lanois adding haunting, spacy production touches from his studio in LA.

The result is a long way from being Tinariwen's country album, for the central pillar of the sound remains rooted profoundly in the traditions of their age-old culture. Yet the mix of banjos, fiddles and soaring pedal steel with the group's trademark serpentine guitar lines and hypnotic desert grooves is nothing less than glorious. To sound so fresh and original more than 20 years into their career represents a triumphant achievement. ***NW***

Picture credit: Marie Planeille

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Depeche Mode

Memento Mori

★★★★½

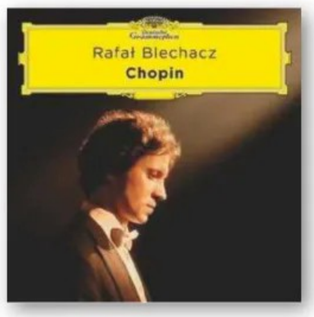
CD **Columbia/Mute**

THE STOIC TITLE of Depeche Mode's first album in six years – translated as 'remember you must die' – is freighted with significance in more ways than one. First, it comes only a year after the untimely death of founder member Andy Fletcher. Secondly, it finds the surviving duo of Martin Gore and Dave Gahan executing an unexpected career regeneration on DM's finest album since the Nineties. With its minimalist echoes of Kraftwerk and Bowie, the key is the simplicity of their dark synth-pop. Death

With Gahan's baritone voice in fine fettle, it's the sound of a band that has been through it all

stalks many of the songs, but there's hope buried in there too, particularly on *People Are Good*, the bittersweet *Where Are We Now?* and the uplifting *Ghosts*. With Gahan's baritone voice in fine fettle, it's the sound of a band that has been through it all and is resigned to their own mortality, but is determined to defy the dying of the light as long as they have the breath to do so. ***NW***

Picture credit: Anton Corbijn (Depeche Mode)



Chopin

Rafał Blechacz

★★★★½

CD **Deutsche Grammophon**

THIS IS BLECHACZ'S first solo album in five years, so clearly he's not interested in making recordings just for the sake of it. Performances are exquisitely played, with a sovereign command of tone colour and detail. He has wonderful technique that ensures every note is perfectly placed, resulting in flawless clarity. It sounds like the music has been thoroughly assimilated making everything sound effortlessly natural and right – sensitive and finely shaded, yet red-blooded and spontaneous. DG's piano sound is clear and unobtrusively natural, with crisp impact and a sweet open top that ensures climaxes are immediate and dynamic. ***JH***

Whiskerman

Champions (Deluxe Edition)

★★★★½

CD **Royal Oakie**

THE CALIFORNIAN FOUR-PIECE originally released this fan favourite in 2016, but here it is all buffed up with extra tracks and for the first time in a physical format. It's a rum mix of Beach Boy pop, Ween wonkiness and even Radiohead dread-rock. *Buddy* is a bouncy piano pounder that does well to burrow into your head for a long stay. Things get almost Philly-level silky-soulful on *Delilah* (no relation to the Tom Jones opus), while *Louie* has a spiky sensibility that brings to mind XTC. All manner of pop is here and despite the ceaseless trying on of sounds and styles, it all works well and brings a lot of aural satisfaction. ***PSH***

HOT PICK

Seong-Jin Cho is a very refined pianist, and his playing has great finesse

The Handel Project

Handel 3 Suites; Brahms Handel Variations
Seong-Jin Cho

★★★★★

CD **Deutsche Grammophon**

WE REGULARLY HEAR Bach's keyboard music played on the modern concert grand, but Handel's much less. The result is breathtakingly beautiful, taking Handel out of his time to create music that sounds gloriously timeless. Seong-Jin Cho thinks Brahms' *Handel Variations* "the best variations ever written". His playing is authoritative, yet teasing and playful. He's fully equal to Brahms' dense fiendishly tricky keyboard writing, making light of the most fearsome passages. Wilhelm Kempff's arrangement of the *G minor minuet* – played with exquisite grace – makes a lovely wistful encore. DG's piano sound is sonorous, clear and limpid, with impressive weight and richness. ***JH***

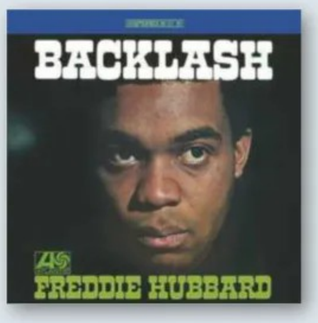
AUDIOFILE VINYL ★★★★★

Freddie Hubbard

Backlash

HOT PICK

180g vinyl **Speakers Corner**



RELEASED IN 1967 *Backlash* was the first of Freddie Hubbard's records for Atlantic and in this note-perfect reissue carries a beautiful two-tone green label from that era. It finds the supremely talented trumpet player in the company of James Spalding on flute and alto sax, a musician with whom Hubbard synchs superbly whether they are in unison or sparking off of one another. Backing includes piano, bass and drums as well as percussion from Ray Barretto (Kenny Burrell, Herbie Mann *etc.*) and everyone is on top of their game. The power that Otis Ray Appleton gets out of the kick drum is surprising for this vintage, but this is a high-energy recording with plenty of variety between its six tracks.

The title jam is a banger that really chugs with blazing brass and backing that's so hot you can almost smell the sweat dripping off the players. This vibe continues for *The Return Of The Prodigal Son*, but things quickly chill for *Little Sunflower* with some lovely flute playing. *On The Que-Tee* picks up the pace again while *Up Jumped Spring* has all the lightness of that season. *Echoes Of Blue* is almost out there, mixing melody with borderline avant garde, it keeps you intrigued for nigh on 10 minutes. Supreme stuff. ***JK***

Everything But The Girl

Fuse

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Buzzin' Fly Records**

WITH THEIR FIRST new album since the last century, the duo continue with the electronic approach they adopted in the mid-Nineties. Tracey Thorn, surely one of the UK's great vocalists, gilds every song with her distinctive pipes. *When You Mess Up* is an atmospheric take on relationship trauma that has a hypnotic piano riff with a siren-like attraction. There's lots of 21st-century electronica throbbing across *No One Knows We're Dancing*, a last-sway-at-the-disco gem. *Karaoke* is the album winner, a downbeat balm for all those that like their music sparse and engaging. An album of complexity and depth and well worth the wait. ***PSH***

We're keeping fingers crossed Wang will play this at the BBC Proms

Yuja Wang

The American Project; Abrams; Tilson; Thomas; Louisville Orchestra

★★★★☆

CD **Deutsche Grammophon**

COMPOSED FOR WANG, Teddy Abrams' piano concerto is a sassy extrovert jazz/rock-inspired crossover classical work. It plays continuously but divides into 11 sections that include four solo cadenzas. A big fun piece, it's racy and exciting, with parts for electric guitar, bass, organ, Rhodes piano, plus percussion; if Yuja ever plays it at the BBC Proms it's sure to bring the house down. The solo part is fiendishly difficult and demands great virtuosity – not to mention stamina – but Ms Wang makes light of its difficulties. The brief *You Come Here Often?* by Michael Tilson Thomas makes an interesting filler. DG's recording sounds smooth open and very natural. Play it loud! ***JH***

Poètesses Symphoniques

Betsy Jolas; Bonis; Boulanger; Holmès Orchestre National De Metz; David Reiland

★★★★☆

CD **La Dolce Volta**

HERE'S A FASCINATING disc of rare orchestral works by largely unknown 20th-century women composers. The only one moderately well known is the highly gifted but doomed Lili Boulanger, whose promising career as a composer was cut short by her early death. Each of the works is skilfully written and musically interesting – well worth taking the time to get to know. David Reiland and the Metz orchestra produce some impressively atmospheric sounds that are well caught by the engineers in a rich spacious recording of demonstration quality. Just try the opening work *Andromède* by Augusta Holmès and you'll be hooked. ***JH***

Mudhoney

Plastic Eternity

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Sub Pop**

SOME 35 YEARS on since their inception, Mudhoney are not only surviving but still evolving. In the early years, the band were known for their nihilism and almost comic self-deprecation, but now it's a different beast entirely, most notably in the lyrics – now more likely to be savaging the political classes than describing the art of vomiting. Musically, the trademark Stooges-like garage rock is still in abundance, but with tracks like *One Or Two* (acoustic guitars and flutes?) this record shows that Mudhoney are not afraid to try new things, and not only get away with them but also make them their own. ***PH***

COOL COLLECTION

Having forged himself a successful solo career and published his autobiography, *Verse, Chorus, Monster!*, Graham Coxon reunites with Blur this summer for a series of sold-out mega-gigs, So, what better time to investigate a trio of albums which turn him on?

Talk Talk

Spirit Of Eden

Parlophone (1988)

TT's fourth LP was the point where Mark Hollis left the band behind to navigate stiller waters. Coxon says: "If I ever make an album as good as this I'll be happy for the rest of my life, probably. Danny Thompson [double bass player who played with Pentangle, accompanied John Martyn and guested on Coxon's *The Spinning Top*] is on it, and it's kind of obvious immediately, his bass playing is amazing, everything just sounds perfect."

King Crimson

In The Court Of The Crimson King

Island (1969)

King Crimson's debut, via *21st Century Schizoid Man*, this album marked the point where guitarist and band leader Robert Fripp decided it was time for prog to pal up to heavy metal."I rediscovered this recently, one of my favourites," says Coxon. "It must be in my top-five albums. I got into it when I was a teenager in Colchester and it's reared its ugly face again. It's just a bloody masterpiece, absolutely."

Syd Barrett

The Madcap Laughs

Harvest (1970)

Barrett, who'd just been bounced from Pink Floyd due to his chemical intake and irrational behaviour, pieced this psych masterpiece together out of many an erratic recording session. It credits five different producers, but there's only one Syd. "It's just full of those moments that make your hairs stand up," says Coxon: "and that's what I always wanted to make partly with my solo albums. But you don't know whether you actually do that or not, because you're 'you'."

Picture credit: Edward Bishop (Everything But The Girl)

AD TO COME

Steve Reich

The String Quartets
Mivos Quartet

★★★★★

CD **Deutsche Grammophon**

STEVE REICH'S *THREE* *String Quartets* are deliciously unconventional. *Different Trains* (1978) contrasts the boyhood US trips he took during the early-Fourties – shuttling between the New York and Los Angeles houses of his divorced parents – with the sinister train journeys bound for concentration camps undertaken by young Jews in Europe at the same time. The *Triple Quartet* (1998) is less programmatic, more abstract. Composed for three quartets – either three playing live or one live and two recorded, as here – it was inspired by the lively vigorous ending of Bartók's *Fourth Quartet*. The events of 9/11 are covered in Reich's most recent quartet, written 2009/10. The Mivos Quartet is beyond praise; their playing – vibrant and athletic– marries breathtaking precision with effortless accuracy and could hardly be bettered. Excellent sound too – crisp, clear, atmospheric, and unobtrusively detailed. ***JH***

The Mivos Quartet marries breathtaking precision with effortless accuracy

Schubert

Piano Trios; Notturno; Rondo; Arpeggione Sonata; Christian Tetzlaff; Tanya Tetzlaff; Lars Vogt

★★★★★

2x CD **Ondine**

THESE WERE AMONG the last sessions completed by pianist Vogt before his untimely death in September 2022. All the works are late Schubert, who was by then facing his own early demise. Despite moments of jauntiness, the music is permeated with weight and sadness. All three players are outstanding musicians and the performances are effortlessly precise and perfectly executed. A surprisingly wide emotional range is covered and more than once you're startled by the sheer soaring intensity of the playing. Ondine's recordings are clean and smooth with a good balance between the three instruments. ***JH***

Harald Grosskopf

Oceanheart + Ocean Revisited

★★★★★

Vinyl **Bureau B**

GROSSKOPF'S DEBUT SOLO album *Synthesist* is a jewel in the crown of early Eighties electronica – and 1986's *Oceanheart* is no slouch either. Presented here as an expanded set, *Oceanheart*'s Eighties synthesisers sound retro-futuristic in 2023 rather than cheesily dated, which is no mean feat. The ambient soundworld of the title cut and tabla-and-sequencer duel of *Pondicherry Dream* are among the album's most rewarding, as is bubbling, ecstatic opener *Eve On The Hill*. The second disc of this deluxe edition is an analogue contemporary reimagining of the album by Grosskopf and engineer Tobias Stock. ***SB***

Filter

The Amalgamut

★★★★★

2x vinyl **Craft Recordings**

MARKING ITS 20TH anniversary, the third album from ex-Nine Inch Nails axeman Richard Patrick and his band sees Filter's approachable blend of industrial pop and post grunge metal make an appearance on vinyl for the first time. As you'd expect from hits *American Cliché* and advertising exec favourite *The Only Way (Is The Wrong Way)*, saw-tooth guitar, drumkit falling down the stairs skins bashing and throat-shredding cries of angst are the order of the day. It's not exactly original, but fans will delight in the inexplicably numerous remixes of *Where Do We Go from Here*. ***JDW***

Walter Smith III

Return To Casual

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Blue Note**

MAKING HIS DEBUT on the label, saxophonist and composer Smith III hits the ground swinging with ten jazz-fuelled tracks that put the sax front and centre. *Shine* opens with a gentle piano melody, but builds a solid frame around the showboating blowing. It's a thrill. Trade descriptions are stretched with the raucous *Quiet Song,* although the playing does fade to a gentle whisper by the end. If you're looking for something to loosen up after a long day, *Mother Stands For Comfort* is a gentle beauty and things become dense on the mesmerising keyboard, drums and sax throwdown *K8 + BYU$*. ***PSH***

The Van Pelt

Artisans & Merchants

★★★★★

CD **Gringo**

THE CULT INDIE, post-rock heroes of the Nineties return with their first new album for 25 years. Straddling several sub-genres, the New York four-piece were known for their almost spoken word lyrics over controlled, emotive post-punk and post-hardcore stylings. The spoken word elements still remain, but the band are more strident in both production and execution these days. Chris Leo and the gang provide driving, hard-edge indie pop, shaggy-dog storytelling and uplifting choruses. *Cold Coconuts* and *Did We Hear The Same Song* are cases in point. After so long, The Van Pelt seem to have refined and elevated their sound. ***PH***

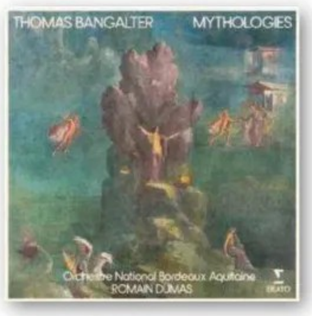
Picture credits: Tony Aguilera (Filter) and Mélissa Gamache (Braids)

Mozart
Piano Concertos K467; K491; Academy of Ancient Music; Robert Levin; Richard Egarr

★★★★☆

CD **AAM**

IN THE EARLY Nineties, Levin and the AAM began a complete recording of Mozart's piano concertos with Christopher Hogwood for Decca/Florilegium. Around eight discs were issued before the series was scuppered... And now they're getting the band back together, and here's the first instalment of the missing concertos. Levin's performances are lively and full of personality, while the AAM and Egarr provide keen support, with much hidden detail brought out. Levin provides imaginative cadenzas that are exciting and impressive. The recordings sound bright and detailed. ***JH***



Thomas Bangalter
Mythologies

★★★★★

CD **Erato/Warner Classics**

AFTER RIPPING UP the rule book as one half of Daft Punk, Bangalter's reinvention on his first major solo project could hardly be more dramatic. Composed as the score for a ballet, *Mythologies* is a full-scale work for massed symphony orchestra. Presented in 23 pieces for different scenes and performed by the Orchestre National Bordeaux with impressive brio, Bangalter draws on a smorgasbord of classical influences from baroque (*Les Reniassances*) to romantic grandeur (*Danse Funebre*) via Steve Reich-like minimalism (*Le Catch*). Heaven knows what fans of *Get Lucky* will think of it, but it's really rather magnificent. ***NW***

Braids
Euphoric Recall

★★★★★

CD **Secret City Records**

THE MONTREAL THREE-PIECE is back with their fifth album, which deftly combines sweeping orchestral arrangements with gently throbbing electronics to beguiling effect. The eight tracks here are artfully constructed, with ethereal flights aplenty – ably provided by Raphaelle Standell-Preston's swooning vocals – and each track is like an enchanting mix of Björk and The Notwist. In fact, *Euphoric Recall* is the perfect title because it ebbs and flows gorgeously, not least the closing, shimmering diptych of *Retriever* and *Euphoric Recall*. Sublime stuff from Canada. ***PH***

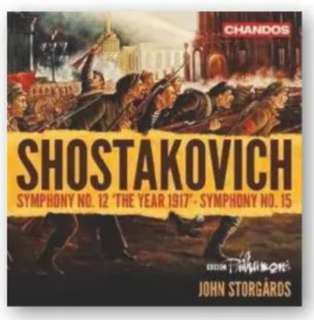
The God In Hackney
The World in Air Quotes

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Junior Aspirin Records**

EARLY GENESIS MEETS Talk Talk in a dark alley round the back of Sunset Boulevard is arguably the best way to sum up LA-based Brit wannabes The God In Hackney. Another is that this is the most enthralling melange of art rock and new wave in the last decade. Four musicians play almost everything and they're not averse to a sample, albeit these aren't obvious ones. What comes across is an inventiveness that works across genres thanks to the strength of songwriting. Try *Broken Pets* on for size then dive into the King Crimson-inspired *Interstate 5*, it's an intense ride in all the right ways. ***JK***



Shostakovich
Symphonies No. 12 & 15
BBC Philharmonic Orchestra
John Storgårds

★★★★☆

SACD **Chandos**

THESE TWO SYMPHONIES have never been coupled before and make strange bedfellows – the verbose grandiloquent *12th* contrasting sharply with the enigmatic *15th*. Storgårds delivers a strong full-blooded account that packs a punch without sounding empty or bombastic. The *15th*, by turns bright and shadowy, is a mix of high jinks and introspection that only Shostakovich could create. It gets a well-paced reading that goes to the heart of the music with a strange ending leaving one bemused. The Chandos recording is excellent; clear forward and detailed, with a nice 'concert hall' ambience that suggests width and depth. ***JH***

OPEN REEL TAPE

John Coltrane
Blue Train

★★★★★

Open reel tape **Hemiolia Records**

COLTRANE'S ICONIC JAZZ cut was released in January 1958 on Blue Note Records. Now, the Italian Hemiolia Records, in conjunction with Ermitage (which holds the original production master) have released an exclusive copy-master tape version that has been made directly from Ermitage's first-generation stereo production master. Hemiolia Records is the brainchild of recording engineer Pietro Benini and his business partner Claudio Valeri. Their company is based in two locations: the Hemiolia headquarters in Perugia, Umbria, and the recording and mastering studio in Savio, Emilia Romagna.

The company's master tapes are made using two Otari MTR 15 recorders with the recording machine calibration on each blank tape. Each tape is accompanied by an A4P (Analog Four Phases) Certificate of Authenticity that is individually signed by either Benini or Valeri, which not only assures the authenticity of each album, but also guarantees that the recording remains in the analogue domain in every production phase – making it a true 'AAA' recording. The tapes in Ermitage's archive are first generation 'flat' production masters, which are the original flat mix prepared for any kind of subsequent remastering, and the *Blue Train* source was used by Hemiolia Records.

The album is issued on RTM (Recording The Masters) SM900 premium high-output studio tape and supplied in excellent packaging with a heavy cardboard and well-padded outer box for transit and an extremely high-quality album box that contains the two beautiful 10.5in metal spools, each located on lovely wooden NAB hub supports. A certificate of authenticity is included, together with detailed technical sheet. As far as the sound quality is concerned, it certainly lives up to Blue Note's original aim, which was to give you the impression of: "being a fly on the wall of an original Blue Note recording session". In short, the sound quality is simply stunning.

The first track on tape 1 is the title track. The stereo imaging is excellent, with the drums and bass on the right, piano on the left and Coltrane's saxophone in the centre. The realism is quite startling in my room. The second track, *Moment's Notice*, is energetic and lively – wonderful jazz. These two fill up the 20 minutes of Tape 1. The first track on the second reel is *Locomotion*, which launches the tape with a powerful drum opening that almost makes me jump out of my seat! The nostalgic *I'm Old Fashioned* quietens things down, before final track *Lazy Bird* finishes the tape with some classic fast-paced jazz. This is a truly wonderful recording in every respect and I really can't recommend it highly enough. ***NR***

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Picture credit: Anton Corbijn

ENJOY THE **SILENCE**

From sugary pop to drug-addled stadium fillers, Depeche Mode have seen it all. *Music Legends*' own personal Jesus, ***Nigel Williamson***, just can't get enough

Look through the archives of *Smash Hits* from the early Eighties and you will be confronted by pages of quiffed-up synth-pop acts and new romantics. Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, Kajagoogoo, Japan, A Flock Of Seagulls, Heaven 17, Ultravox… the list is endless. Most have long since been lost in action or reduced to sad nostalgia tours. But one name stands out for its endurance and uncompromising determination to continue making challenging and fearless music: Depeche Mode.

Not only did the band from Essex survive the yuppie decade of big hair and shoulder pads with their dignity intact, they only hit their peak once the Eighties were over when they enjoyed the biggest-selling album of their career with 1990's *Violator*.

The album broke them in America, sold six million copies and turned them into electronic music's first stadium band. The World Violation tour which followed saw them playing to 1.2 million people and reportedly breaking the record for merchandise sales previously held by Bon Jovi. Hell, even Johnny Cash dug them and proved it by covering *Personal Jesus*.

Success on such a level brought the inevitable problems – bust-ups, drug overdoses, addiction, alcoholism, nervous breakdowns and suicide attempts, fear and loathing. It was the usual volatile dysfunctional mayhem that left members reluctant to live on the same continent, let alone share a tour bus.

Yet Depeche Mode pulled through and more than 40 years on from their debut LP the band – now down to the core duo of Martin Gore and Dave Gahan – has just released its 15th studio album *Memento Mori* and embarked on their first world tour in five years. It's a bittersweet occasion for it is their first time on stage without founder member Andy Fletcher, who suddenly died in May 2022 at the age of 60 after suffering an aortic dissection.

Fletch, as he was universally known, was not the band's main creative force. "Martin's the songwriter, Dave's the vocalist, and I bum around," he said self-deprecatingly in DA Pennebaker's 1989 documentary film about the band. Yet in many ways Fletcher was Depeche Mode's rock. The least affected by fame and stardom, aside from a nervous breakdown in the Nineties, he was the one who kept his head when all around him were losing theirs and who acted as peacemaker when the band were at war with each other. Gahan and Gore called him: "the tie-breaker".

The more nihilistic and bleak the songs became, the more popular the band seemed to get

The planning and writing for *Memento Mori* began during lockdown when Fletcher was still part of the band, but recording had not yet started when he died. For the briefest of moments, Gahan and Gore thought about calling it a day but after spending all their adult lives in Depeche Mode, it was never really an option.

Richard Butler of the Psychedelic Furs was recruited to co-write a number of the songs and having survived detox, rehab, therapy and heart-rending loss to make it into their sixties, Gahan and Gore somehow fashioned what may well be their most potent album since before the turn of the millennium.

The songs are filled with classic Depeche Mode themes of sex, addiction and death – lent, as Gore puts it: "an extra level of meaning" by Fletcher's untimely demise. Nor can there be any argument with the description on their website that the album runs: "the gamut from paranoia and obsession to catharsis and joy, and hitting myriad points between". As a tribute to Fletch's memory it could not be more powerful.

Just can't get enough

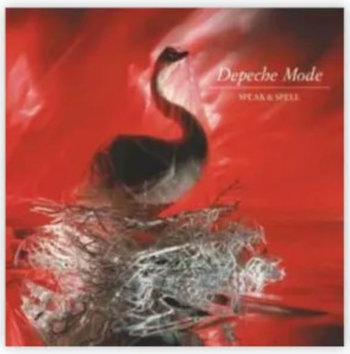
But let us backtrack more than 40 years to where it all began – Basildon in suburban Essex in the late Seventies. Thatcherism is about to be unleashed and 'Basildon man' has become political shorthand to personify her archetypal supporter who had switched from Labour on the back of such promises as the right to buy one's council house.

Meanwhile, Basildon man's teenage children are embracing an insurrection of a different kind led by the Sex Pistols and The Clash. Schoolmates Andy Fletcher and Vince Clarke form a band called No Romance In China while across town Martin Gore is playing guitar in a duo called Norman And The Worms. By 1980 Fletcher, Clarke and Gore teamed up to form a band called Composition Of Sound. When they discover Dave Gahan singing David Bowie's *Heroes* in a local scout hut, they become a quartet and by June they're ready to play their first gig at a local school.

Liberated by the advent of affordable synthesisers and influenced by Bowie, Siouxsie, Iggy and Talking Heads, they change ▶

ALBUM BY ALBUM

1981 ▶ 1982 ▶ 1983 ▶ 1984 ▶ 1986



SPEAK & SPELL

Cheerful synth-pop on the band's only album to feature Vince Clark, who wrote all but two of the 11 songs, including the hit singles *New Life* and *Just Can't Get Enough*.

A BROKEN FRAME

Down to a trio, Gore emerges as the main songwriter on a lightweight set that plays to their *Smash Hits* audience. *Leave In Silence* and *See You* are the stand-out songs.

CONSTRUCTION TIME AGAIN

A transitional album sees DM move away from straight pop as Gore's lyrics take on a more enigmatic twist and Wilder emerges as a serious musical force.

SOME GREAT REWARD

Their first truly great album on which Gore's lyrics tackle religion (*Blasphemous Rumours*), deviant sex (*Master And Servant*) and Gahan's baritone voice takes on newly expressive depths.

BLACK CELEBRATION

Poor reviews at the time failed to do justice to a record that has since been more favourably reassessed, full of fresh-sounding melodies and Gore's increasingly bold and dark sensibility.

Founder member Andy 'Fletch' Fletcher sadly died in May last year

their name to Depeche Mode, borrowed from the title of a French fashion magazine.

As they plunge into London's new romantic scene, their recording debut comes in 1981 when the Some Bizzare label releases a compilation of tracks by unsigned bands including Soft Cell, The The and Blancmange. Depeche Mode contribute *Photographic*. They will later re-record it for their debut album.

Having put together a demo tape, instead of mailing, they hawk it around London's record labels, demanding an immediate hearing.

In the end, it wasn't the demo that was to land them a deal, but a live appearance at the Bridge House in East London's Canning Town attended by electronic producer Daniel Miller, who signed them to his label Mute, which would remain Depeche Mode's home for the next three decades.

A succession of increasingly successful electro-pop dance singles followed starting with *Dreaming Of Me* and then by *New Life*, which climbed to number 11 in the UK charts and got them on *Top Of The Pops* for the first time, the band having to carry their synthesisers on the train as they made their way to the BBC studios.

The follow-up, *Just Can't Get Enough* gave Depeche Mode their first top-ten hit and *Smash Hits* took the band to its poptastic heart, writing that: "synthesisers and bubblegum go together like tinned peaches and Carnation,

Even Johnny Cash dug them and proved it by covering the band's *Personal Jesus*

hence Depeche Mode's hit singles: melody, uncluttered electronics and nice voices in humanising harmony".

Their debut album *Speak & Spell* made number 10 in the UK charts on its release in October 1981, but almost immediately Clarke left to form Yazoo with Alison Moyet. It was major blow, for he had written almost all of the songs on *Speak & Spell*, but Depeche Mode regrouped with Gore taking over the songwriting duties and Alan Wilder, a classically trained keyboardist, joining the lineup after responding to an ad in *Melody Maker* which insisted that only those under 21 need apply.

Wilder was initially hired on trial as a touring member only, but was soon fully integrated and was billed as the group's musical director until his departure in 1995.

He did not appear on Depeche Mode's second album 1982's *A Broken Frame*, the simple, bubbly dance-pop of which gave little hint of what was to come. "Every inch as empty as *Speak&Spell*… puerile infatuations papering over anonymity," a certain Steve Sutherland wrote in a scathing review in *Melody Maker* and for a while it seemed that the band's teen-pop image had shunted them up a sugary cul-de-sac.

Some great reward

"I regret all that sickly boy-next-door stuff of the early days," Gore later said. "We were just completely naïve," Gahan concurred. "We came out wearing these stupid clothes and found ourselves grouped with bands like Duran and Spandau. We thought it would be good to be in *Smash Hits* answering questions about our socks, appearing on Saturday morning television, making prats of ourselves. It backfired on us."

A rethink was called for and it came with 1983's *Construction Time Again* with Gore's lyrics taking on a darker, more enigmatic twist and Wilder emerging as a serious musical force on a record which drew on such influences as Einstürzende Neubauten.

Even better was *Some Great Reward* (1984) on which Gore's lyrics tackled weighty subjects including organised religion (*Blasphemous Rumours*), deviant sex (*Master And Servant*) and politics although his melodic sensibility and ability to craft a memorable hook meant the run of hit singles continued.

Suddenly the new leftfield Depeche Mode were almost hip and even *Melody Maker* was

1987 | 1990 | 1993 | 1997 | 2001

MUSIC FOR THE MASSES

The title was, of course, a joke in response to those who yearned for a return to their teen-pop style, but songs such as *Strangelove* and *Little 15* are classics as they prepared to enter their imperial phase.

VIOLATOR

DM's undisputed masterpiece and the record that turned them into stadium-filling rock gods. *Personal Jesus*, *Enjoy The Silence*, *Policy Of Truth* and *World In My Eyes* gave them four hit singles from the album.

SONGS OF FAITH AND DEVOTION

Conflict and tension as guitars and live drums join the synths on the last album to feature Alan Wilder, who wryly noted: "we were in the worst state, but creating some of our best work."

ULTRA

Picking up the pieces as a trio after the longest gap between albums in their career to date. Gloom and doom in excelsis as many of the songs reference the band's recent dysfunction.

EXCITER

Despite receiving decidedly mixed reviews on its release, *Exciter*'s rock-inflected minimalist techno was fresh and confident and showed a band still prepared to experiment as it celebrated its 20th anniversary.

Gore and Gahan seriously considered calling it a day after Fletch's untimely death

won over. "It used to be okay to slag this bunch off because of their lack of soul, their supposed synthetic appeal, their reluctance to really pack a punch", the paper noted, but *Some Great Reward*: "trashes such bad old talk into the ground and demands that you now sit up and take notice of what is happening here, right under your nose".

Even darker and denser to the point of claustrophobia in its demi-monde decadence was *Black Celebration* (1986). Yet oddly, the further away Depeche Mode moved from their *Smash Hits* dance-pop origins and the more nihilistic and bleak the songs became, the bigger the band seemed to get. This marked their fifth consecutive UK top-ten album and their highest-charting entry to date.

Music For The Masses (1987) – the title was intended as a joke – had a similarly brooding mood, but it was 1990's *Violator* that launched Depeche Mode into the stratosphere as stadium-filling rock gods. Gore's songs on the album dealt in his by-now customary topics of guilt, salvation and obsession while the arrival

They only hit their peak once the Eighties were over with the biggest-selling album *Violator*

of Flood as a producer resulted in a more cinematic soundscape, full of sleek sonic detail but splashed with catchy hooks on the album's four hit singles *Personal Jesus*, *Enjoy The Silence*, *Policy Of Truth* and *World In My Eyes*.

"There's these two extreme views of Depeche Mode. We're either pop or doom and gloom," Gahan remarked. "But we're actually both."

The success of *Violator* meant the band's world would never be quite the same again. "We'd been going along quite nicely," Fletcher noted. "Then when it came to *Violator* we inexplicably went huge. It was just incredible, and in many ways we never really recovered... we just felt like we wanted to muck it up a bit."

The follow-up, 1993's *Songs Of Faith And Devotion* debuted at number one on both sides of the Atlantic, making Depeche Mode only the sixth band ever to do so. The album bore the influence of grunge with guitars and live drums restored alongside the ever-present synths. But the wheels were coming off. The tour that accompanied the album was described by *Q* magazine as: "the most debauched rock 'n' roll tour ever". Addicted to heroin, Gahan reportedly required cortisone shots in order get on stage, Gore suffered an alcoholic seizure and Fletch had a full-on nervous breakdown, which resulted in him dropping out of several tour dates. Surveying the carnage, nobody could blame Wilder for concluding that after 13 years it was time to move on.

Following a near-death experience in which Gahan's heart stopped beating for two minutes before he was revived by medics, he went into rehab before Depeche Mode regrouped as a trio for 1997's *Ultra*. The album returned to a high-tech synth-heavy sound with suitably morose songs full of references to the band's recent travails, but perhaps wisely they didn't risk going on tour to promote the album.

However, 2001's *Exciter* displayed Depeche Mode's resilience in the face of near-catastrophe. Despite mixed reviews, its hybrid amalgam of minimalist techno and rock elements sounded fresh and confident.

The group continued to record and tour as a trio, headlining festivals from Lollapalooza to Coachella while the albums *Playing The Angel* (2005), *Sounds Of The Universe* (2009), *Delta Machine* (2013) and *Spirit* (2017) all made the top ten in both the US and UK, confirming their place in the pantheon was secure.

They were finally inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 2020. Lockdown meant the acceptance speeches were delivered via Zoom and it was the last time Gahan and Gore were to appear in public alongside Fletcher.

His death changed everything and nothing, Gore says. "It cemented the idea that we had to carry on. The idea that we should all be making the most of our time on earth – it's kind of an important message. And it's even more important now Andy's gone." ●

Picture credits: Anton Corbijn (right) and Shutterstock/Ivica Drusany (left)

2005 | 2009 | 2013 | 2017 | 2023

PLAYING THE ANGEL

Notable for Gahan's emergence for the first time as a writer, contributing the songs *Suffer Well*, *I Want It All* and *Nothing's Impossible* while Gore gets a chance to take lead vocals on *Macro* and *Damaged People*.

SOUNDS OF THE UNIVERSE

With Gahan again contributing as a writer, the band recorded 22 songs of which 13 made the final cut. The high bar was rewarded when it debuted at number two in the UK chart.

DELTA MACHINE

Lushly recorded and full of a dark eroticism, balancing catchy Eighties electro-pop tropes with the weightier and melodramatic doom-and-gloom aesthetic of later years, laced intriguingly with a kind of synthetic blues vibe.

SPIRIT

The last album to feature Andy Fletcher and the most political, with songs protesting the destruction of the environment (*The Worst Crime*) and advocating militant activism (*Where's The Revolution*).

MEMENTO MORI

Themes of sex, addiction and death, made more potent by Fletcher dying just before recording began. In effect, the album is a tribute to his memory even though the songs were mostly written before he passed away.

Peter Tyson

AUDIO / VISUAL

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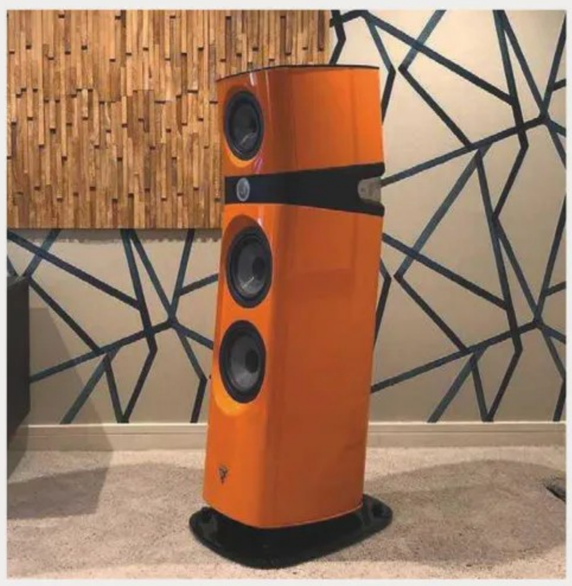

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Chord Company
Clearway Power cable

INTENDED AS AN upgrade over the 'kettle lead' usually bundled with a system, the Clearway Power features a double foil shield – located under the outer jacket – designed to reduce the pick-up of high-frequency noise that is common within the home. The screening also reduces the possibility of any interaction with other nearby cables.

The Clearway Power contains three high-purity multi-strand copper conductors insulated with PVC, which has a high mechanical damping factor. The conductors are screened with a dual-foil screen and the cable is finished off with a high-density vibration damping outer jacket. Apart from UK 13A mains plug and 10A IEC high-specification connectors, it can also be supplied with a Schuko mains plug, 16A IEC or figure-of-eight connector. American and Australian mains plugs are also available. The Clearway Power is supplied in 1m, 1.5m, 2m and 3m lengths, with custom sizes to order.

A kind of magic

Connecting the mains lead to the power supply of my preamp and phono stage in place of a standard mains lead, I start off auditioning with some big band jazz and a 45rpm LP of Lyn Stanley's *Novel Noel* album. Her rendition of *It's Magic* sounds very classy and the relaxed and sophisticated style of singing really comes through beautifully clearly on my system. The instrument focus and clarity are both excellent and the soundstage is expansive throughout.

Haydn's *Baryton Trios* performed by the Esterhazy Baryton Trio is a great contrast to the Lyn Stanley album. A baryton is a stringed instrument about the size of a cello that is fitted with six or seven strings that can be bowed. It has a number of thin, metal strings running behind the fingerboard, which cannot be played but will resonate when the upper ones are bowed. The result is a unique sound that can be quite a challenge for an audio system to reproduce well, but here is handled perfectly with the Clearway Power cable installed. This is a great-value cable upgrade for any system. ***NR***

DETAILS

PRICE
£125 for 1m cable

WEBSITE
chord.co.uk

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Intro XLR stereo interconnect

BLACK RHODIUM'S INTRO range has been created very much with affordability in mind and the hand-built XLR stereo interconnect is designed to offer a high-quality sound at a competitive price.

Braiders of the lost art

Available in a choice of seven different coloured braids to assist in differentiating between different sources, it is screened and contains two cores – thus providing the three connections that are required for the balanced XLR connectors. A large ferrite core is placed close to one end to attenuate radio frequency interference and offer a clearer and more detailed sound across the audio frequency spectrum. The interconnect is supplied as a pair of 1m cables as standard, but other lengths can are available to order.

Connecting the Intro XLR between my Studer A810 pro tape machine and unity-gain balanced-to-unbalanced preamp, I play a 15IPS copy-master tape of Bert Kaempfert's classic *Bye Bye Blues* album from 1965. The title track starts off with the trademark crackling bass and snare drum played with brushes to set the beat and sounds phenomenal. The bass response is tight and well controlled and the top end is bright without being harsh and edgy. In particular, the dynamic range is much more realistic than that of the LP, which I also have. Given that the Intro is a budget interconnect, I am most impressed. Listening to Rimsky Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol* performed by the National Symphony Orchestra, the clarity of each instrument is very evident and the imaging and focus is superb. The music is highly involving and sounds very realistic in my room. The finale is delivered with plenty of power and energy.

With an UltraAnalogue Recording of Grieg's *Cello Sonata*, the dynamic range is spot on and the imaging of the cello and piano clear and well focussed. It's difficult to criticise the Intro XLR as it offers a performance well above its price tag. As such, it comes highly recommended. ***NR***

DETAILS

PRICE
£75 for a 1m XLR cable

WEBSITE
introbyblack rhodium.co.uk

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

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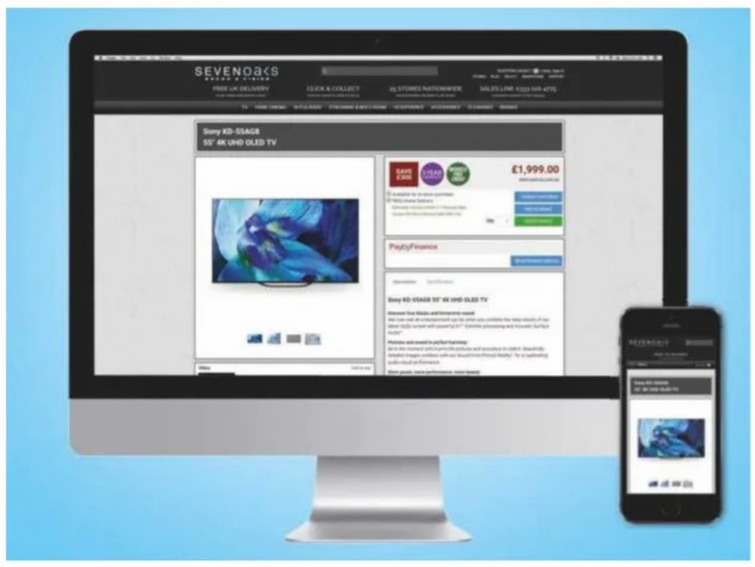

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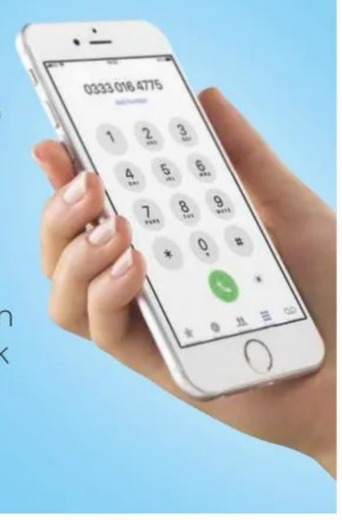

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7000A · £1099

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NEW

NAD
CS1 · £299

Music Streamer

A compact, minimalist design, the NAD CS1 has a pair of line-level analogue RCA outputs for connection to a stereo receiver, integrated amp, preamplifier, or a pair of powered speakers. Alternatively, you can use the CS1's optical or coaxial output to send digital audio to an external DAC or a pair of powered speakers. The CS1 features an advanced differential digital section based on Texas Instruments' PCM5141 DAC, a design known for its wide dynamic range, low noise floor, and immunity to clock jitter. It supports resolution up to 24-bit/192kHz and has full MQA decoding and rendering capability for playing Master Quality music from Tidal.

NEW

SONOS
ERA 300 · £449

Wireless Speaker with Bluetooth

Featuring six optimally positioned drivers all around the front, sides, and top to support Dolby Atmos Music, the breakthrough acoustic design projects sound from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, immersing you in every dimension of the song. No matter where you are or what you play, the listening experience is nothing short of extraordinary. Custom waveguides accurately disperse sound right, left, forward, and above, creating a sensationally spacious stereo soundstage you can feel all around the room.

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NAD • C 700 • BLUOS STREAMING SYSTEM

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£2399

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The new NAD Masters M10 V2 combines hi-res music streaming with state-of-the-art amplification to make it an all-in-one solution that will transport you to your favourite musical destination.

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NEW **£1299**

BLUESOUND

PULSE M • HI-RES WIRELESS SPEAKER

The PULSE M delivers lush, rich, room-filling sound at nearly all angles. Its Omni-Hybrid™ driver design includes an upfiring woofer and two tweeters mounted at 45 degree angles from each other. The PULSE M is not only pleasing to the ears but also the eyes – its elliptical shape adds an elegant accent to any home.

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NEW **£449**

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■ **Cartridges** p119 ■ **Phono stages** p120
■ **Headphones** p120-121 ■ **Portable DACs** p121

CD PLAYERS

Audiolab
6000CDT

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

The 6000CDT is exceptional at revealing what's on your discs to deliver a great big soundstage with plenty of detail inside. It can dig down deep into the mix to eke out the different musical strands while dynamically and rhythmically it's hard to beat at the price. In short, it's a super, highly affordable audiophile CD transport.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio
AXC35

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Something of a budget marvel, you'll have to work extra hard to get the AXC35 to put a foot wrong. Bass is firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing; the tonal palette is pleasingly broad and clean; and though the soundstage doesn't extend much beyond the speakers, there's great depth perspective.

★★★★★

Cyrus
CDi-XR Phantom Black

PRICE: £2,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

Familiar Cyrus traits such as clean speed, punctuality and a strong sense of transparency are present and correct here, but previous signature leanness has been bolstered by a weightier, warmer balance that sounds more natural and inviting but no less detailed. The result is a formidable melding of old and new.

★★★★½

Musical Fidelity
M6scd

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

An exemplary player with more than a hint of star quality to it, the M6scd paints a broad and deep soundstage populated with solid, well-focused and perfectly placed images. Regardless of genre of music or production standard, its handling of spatial elements is among the very best in the business.

★★★★½

Primare
CD35

PRICE: £2,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

The *Group Test* winner that just pips the Saturn MK3 to the post, the neat, clean and minimal CD35 is like the Rega but with more beef and balls. Think of it as a reverse perfect storm – a rare union of positive attributes. The dizzying speed, dynamic tension and perfect mix of delicacy and bite are quite simply jaw dropping.

★★★★★

Rega
Saturn MK3

PRICE: £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

A supremely talented digital source with appeal well beyond the remit of a Rega system, the Saturn MK3 demonstrates an effortlessly musical performance that sounds gloriously 'undigital' without smoothing off or losing any aspect of musicality. It also has superb connectivity and is an utter joy in use.

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER

Audiolab
8300CDQ
£1,100 *HFC* 448
Taking the winning recipe of the 8200CDQ and adding an upgraded DAC with DSD playback, the accurate and uncoloured sound of the Audiolab is unmistakable. Vast amounts of detail are extracted from the mix, soundstaging is incredible and music flows naturally.

★★★★★

Leema Acoustics
Stream IV
£2,300 *HFC* 456
The latest update to this long-established player feels a considerable step forward. CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent, bass is rock solid with visceral depth that positively grips your solar plexus and streaming shares all these qualities for the best of both worlds.

★★★★½

Marantz
SACD 30n
£2,700 *HFC* 468
While its styling might be a touch divisive, the SACD 30n's involving, detailed and highly refined sound is beyond dispute whether it be with SACD or CD. Meanwhile, its neat supreme streaming integration ensures a great performance without discs too.

★★★★★

Roksan
K3 CD Di
£1,300 *HFC* 403
Offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a lively and animated way of presenting the music, the K3 CD Di displays a sweet and even tonal balance with a panoramic soundstage. In short, it's closer to good analogue sound than digital.

★★★★★

AMPLIFIERS

Copland
CSA150

PRICE: £4,988 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

A tube/transistor hybrid that's more than the sum of its parts, the CSA150 is not just a fine all-rounder as it also excels sonically with a big, strong, engaging performance that's also surprisingly subtle and detailed for such a muscular thing. Well worth an audition, it's a bargain at the price considering all that it does.

★★★★★

Cyrus
Classic AMP

PRICE: £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 496

As the name suggests, this is classic Cyrus. The AMP partners four RCA line inputs, an MM phono stage and pre-out with two coaxial and two optical ins with 24-bit/192kHz sampling. The result is top-class refinement and realism to its fast, lively and highly forgiving sound. Ideal if you already have source components.

★★★★★

Exposure
3510

PRICE: From £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Delivering speaker control like a sergeant major on a power trip, you'd be forgiven for thinking the 3510 has been transported from the Eighties – all minimalist design and line-level inputs. Additional USB/DSD64 DAC and MC or MM phono boards are available and the performance comes across like a sizable blast from the past.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
MaiA S3

PRICE: £550 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 492

This *Group-Test* winning integrated ran Rega's io pretty close – ultimately coming out on top thanks to the functionality it offers that the io doesn't. Compact and well made, this is a great-sounding amplifier that does a pretty impressive range of things very well indeed. In short, top of the pile for those on a budget.

★★★★★

Rega
Elex MK4

PRICE: £1,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 500

Arguably the most complete Rega integrated amplifier yet, the Elex MK4 is a stunning bargain capable of an engaging and highly musical performance. Connectivity is spot on, build is superb and it comfortably gives more expensive rival offerings a serious run for their money. An enormous amount of amp for the price.

★★★★★

Rega
io

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

It might appear small and rather plain and it might not be over flowing with features or boast a huge amount of Watts, but give the io a talented source and you can't fail to be impressed by its outrageous musicality and lightness of foot. It's at one with the music with a supple fluency and rhythmical literacy.

★★★★★

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

Cambridge Audio
Edge W
£2,500 *HFC* 447
The Edge W power amplifier quotes 2x 100W RMS output and has oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker. It has a neutral sound with a hint of sweetness and an upbeat nature underwritten by plenty of insight that's seriously good for the money.

★★★★★

Elipson
P1 F/A2700
£2,800/£3,000 *HFC* 494
Elipson's walk on the wild side from speakers to electronics is deeply impressive with this exceptional package far exceeding expectations at the price offering a great combination of power, smoothness, refinement and detail that's highly alluring.

★★★★★

Exposure
XM7/XM9
£1,240/£1,390 *HFC* 429
Fast, open and three dimensional, the XM9 pairing is capable of driving more awkward speaker loads to high levels without any complaint. Partnered with the XM7 preamp/DAC, Exposure's house sound means a fulsome bass, midband detail and a smooth, yet spacious treble.

★★★★★

Rotel
Michi P5/S5
£3,300/£5,400 *HFC* 467
Rotel's high-end sub-brand might not be the last word in attack and slam, and some might bemoan its lack of detail. But that misses the point: when it comes to weight, scale and a breath-takingly natural approach to making music, few combos come even close to this one.

★★★★★

CABLES – INTERCONNECTS

Atlas Cables
Element Achromatic

PRICE: £86 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Achromatic means without colour and that's very much what you get with this affordable offering. Compared with previous Atlas Element cables this has increased OCC copper content on the conductors and a new process for reduced distortion. The result is great spaciousness to the soundstage and imaging plus powerful bass.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Minuet S

PRICE: £240 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 492

Replacing the original Minuet (*HFC* 453), this RCA interconnect is screened to shield against extraneous RFI and EMI interference. The result is improved intimacy in quieter sections of music and great dynamics in the louder passages. The soundstage reveals new breadth and depth coupled with great mids.

★★★★★

Chord Company
Clearway

PRICE: £100 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

A fantastic performer across a broad range of different music styles, the Clearway features the company's proprietary ARAY conductor geometry and ensures that all the detail of the individual instruments remains well defined, throughout playback – adding to the overall realism of the production.

★★★★★

Ecosse Cables
Baton MkII

PRICE: £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 493

Turning out a remarkably sophisticated performance at this price point, the Baton MkII utilises Ultra High Purity Oxygen-Free Copper that's plated in Ultra High Purity Oxygen-Free Silver to minimise signal loss. The result is an analogue interconnect that brings detail and clarity to the fore.

★★★★★

Kimber Kable
Select USB-Cu

PRICE: From £563 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

Terminated with hand-made purpleheart and gaboon ebony connector housings, this distinctive USB cable achieves a soundstage that is both wide and deep. The edginess of violins is deeply impressive while instruments are perfectly located across the room revealing a stunning mix of definition and clarity.

★★★★½

QED
Performance Audio 40i

PRICE: £55 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

The stand-out winner of our interconnect *Group Test*, this black pearl-sheathed offering pairs a supreme sonic showing with impressive build quality and performances free from muddiness at a very generous price.

★★★★★

"A man who stops advertising to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time."
- Henry Ford

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CABLES – MAINS POWER

Atlas Cables
Eos dd

PRICE: £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 452

Referring to 'dual drain' technology, the Eos dd is designed to act as a filter against incoming contamination. The result is an inky blackness between musical phrases and a supremely low noise floor, while detail and imaging improve as interference is banished.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Stream

PRICE: £450 for 1.7m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 430

Black Rhodium has discovered that optimum sound quality is obtained from cables of 1.7m, hence this offering featuring silver-plated copper conductors. And who are we to argue, considering the impressive clarity and focus of instruments combined with a noise floor displaying an impressive lack of interference.

★★★★½

Chord Company
Shawline

PRICE: £200 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 438

Available at a variety of lengths, the Shawline mains cable is made from three lots of 14 AWG multi-strand conductors. Test highlights include superior front-to-back imaging, with all the tonal complexities of the instruments really coming to life, delivering genuine energy to orchestral performances.

★★★★★

Furutech
Roxy

PRICE: £233 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Connecting the Roxy to a source component immediately removes a layer of glare and 'glint' from the sound; tonally it's darkly translucent instead of shiny white gloss, allowing the listener to hear more into the music and appreciate the space between the notes.

★★★★★

IsoTek
Evo3 Initium

PRICE: £65 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 413

IsoTek's entry-level power cable has a distinctive opalescent green finish that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of musical instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

Russ Andrews
30th Anniversary YellO

PRICE: £65 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 423

First introduced in the nineties, the YellO benefits from years of research into the effects of mains quality. Employing pure copper conductors, this relaunched cable results in a wider, deeper soundstage and the improvement it brings to instrument focus has to be heard to be believed.

★★★★★

DragonFly Cobalt

DAC + Preamp + Headphone Amp

The award-winning DragonFly Cobalt has the robust 2.1-volt output to drive almost any headphone, uses a bit-perfect digital volume control for outstanding signal-to-noise ratio, enables seamless compatibility with Apple and Android devices, and is an exceptionally competent and affordable MQA Renderer.

Cobalt's precedent-setting performance is made possible by:

- New ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip with a minimum-phase slow roll-off filter for more natural sound.
- New Microchip PIC32MX274 microprocessor reduces current draw and increases processing speed by 33%.
- Improved power-supply filtering, specifically designed to reduce WiFi, Bluetooth, and cellular noise.
- Includes a form-fitting Carbon-level DragonTail USB-A to USB-C adaptor.

From MP3 to MQA and Hi-Res, DragonFly Cobalt preserves the body, warmth, and natural color in all your music. Experience more beauty at home and everywhere you listen.

audioquest

NETWORK AUDIO PLAYERS

Auralic
Altair G2.1

PRICE: £4,600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Not just a network-attached DAC/preamp, with the addition of onboard storage the Altair G2.1 morphs into a self-contained music hub that reveals itself to be a deliciously neutral and clean source. It presents high levels of detail without sounding mechanical or artificial and musical involvement is top notch across all genres.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio
Edge NQ

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Something of a departure from CA's usual fare, this network music player also combines the additional versatility of a DAC and preamp to serve up a sumptuously wide recorded acoustic, with a hugely expansive sound that partners massive punch with great precision for a clean, direct and enjoyable sound.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
NEO Stream

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

Though it could do with a more comprehensive control app, its sonic capability is absolutely beyond reproach. In fact, the NEO Stream sounds so effortlessly engaging and natural with such a wide spread of different formats and styles that there is no other single-box streamer at the price that comes even close to it.

★★★★★

NAD
M33

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 466

Hot on the heels of 2019's M10, the M33 has raised the bar even further. In its full-size guise it offers the same style, flexibility and ease of use combined with a performance that's just as arresting with analogue sources as it is when streaming. Throw in futureproof MDC updating slots, and you're on to a winner.

★★★★★

Naim
ND5 XS 2

PRICE: £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Delivering Naim's distinctive flare and typically impressive sound – superb low-end drive with texture and presence combined with a delicious sweetness – this Roon-compatible network music player is supremely engineered, over flowing with useful features and capable of a sparkling performance.

★★★★½

Wattson Audio
Madison

PRICE: £3,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 499

Admittedly, there are less costly rival options available that are just as amply featured as this, but the beautifully designed and built Madison is much closer to an end-game streaming proposition with a stunning on-board DAC that delivers consistently top-drawer sonics regardless of the input.

★★★★★

MUSIC SERVERS

Bluesound
Vault 2i
£1,100 *HFC* 452
If you see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem favoured by the Canadian brand and its cohorts, this 2TB, server, ripper and player compatible with up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and MQA files, is a great way of starting off in one room and expanding as your system grows.
★★★★½

Innuos
Zenith Mk3
From £3,000 *HFC* 451
With one of the best interfaces going and a potently flexible spec, the 4TB, CD ripping Zenith can be used as a Roon Core and delivers an outstanding performance that inspires confidence even for those starting out. It should be right near the top of any shortlist.
★★★★½

Melco
N100 EX
£2,000 *HFC* 462
Following a software update back in December 2019, the N100 became the EX so it's now powered by the excellent Intelligent Music Library system – the best in the business. The sharp lines of the chassis combined with the crisp, clean sound help seal the deal.
★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Core
£1,900 *HFC* 438
Equipped with a CD ripper and 1TB SSD, the Uniti Core takes on an understated role as it handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files impeccably. Presentation is pleasingly neutral and it simply lets whatever network audio player is attached get on with the music.
★★★★★

DACS

Alpha Design Labs
Stratos

PRICE: £1,315 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Remarkably flexible at the price, the Stratos offers an impressively wide-reaching range of features without compromising sound quality. The soundstage is wide and open with a refined presentation, delicate details are reproduced with breath-taking accuracy and instrument separation and location are absolutely spot on.

★★★★★

Audiolab
M-DAC+

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

While some DACs can dive deeper into a recording, what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With its stunning grasp of flow and tempo, there's a welcome warmth to its presentation and its solid three dimensional imaging is second to none.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
TT2

PRICE: £3,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

We could talk about dynamic range and noise floor modulation, but the TT2 simply creates a more believable illusion of a physical presence and space than its rivals. Combining superb build, typical design flair and stunning sound quality, this is a DAC that not only believes in the superiority of digital, but goes on to prove it too.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
ZEN One Signature

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 491

Supporting PCM files up to 384kHz and up to DSD256, this converter combines a decent selection of inputs that should be enough for most users while offering an absolutely exceptional level of performance competitive with anything we've heard under £500. Superb build quality seals the deal.

★★★★★

Matrix Audio
Mini-i Pro 3

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Claiming the spoils in *HFC* 482's DAC *Group Test*, the Mini-i Pro 3 offers a winning combination of comprehensive spec and features, a stunning casework and – regardless of which way you elect to employ its services – it sounds absolutely superb. In short, it's the most accomplished digital front end for under a grand.

★★★★★

PS Audio
DirectStream

PRICE: £4,860 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

By converting everything it's fed to DSD, the DirectStream reveals more from CDs than its rivals for a superlative analogue-like sound that has more in common with master tape than anything digital can usually muster. Low-level resolution, refinement and a majestic sense of composure add to the positives.

★★★★★

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IsoTek
EVO3 Polaris

A six outlet distributor that removes Common and Differential mode mains noise. Delivers a marked benefit for dynamic range, a consequence of lowering the noise floor, as well as a general opening up of the soundstage.

★★★★★

IsoTek
EVO3 Initium

An entry-level power cable that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

ATC SCM40

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

One of the company's more compact designs, this 40-litre three-way floorstander is a sealed box cabinet with lower sensitivity than most (necessitating a pretty muscular amp to hear it at its best). However, this is a solid, robust, powerful and gutsy-sounding speaker with plenty of insight and expansive soundstaging. Subtle and delicate enough for softer moments, it's equally comfortable going loud – displaying dramatically rendered crescendos and a fine sense of space.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins 702 Signature

PRICE: £5,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

Sporting B&W's tweeter-on-top, this stunning three-way comes with a glorious Datuk Gloss ebony-coloured veneer. It has a big controlled sound that fills large rooms with ease, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious air and space and impressive soundstaging. Deft handling and plenty of punch complete the package.

★★★★½

DALI Spektor 6

PRICE: £500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 473

This *Group Test* winner positions itself at an extremely competitive price point and while it looks like a £500 loudspeaker, it sounds like it costs way more. It has a lovely natural tone, plus lots of detail and great dynamics. It sounds big, confident and expansive and yet is never overbearing or in anyway in your face. Throw into the mix a devastating combination of finesse and musicality and it's insatiable appetite for rhythm, and it's a no-brainer at the price.

★★★★★

Kerr Acoustic K320 mk.3

PRICE: £7,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

This *Group Test* winning floorstander comprehensively trounced everything else in almost every way in its roundup. It boasts a tonality that's a touch on the warm side of dry alongside a soundstage of architectural precision. In other respects it has extended yet propulsive bass, a joyously open midband and a deliciously lustrous treble. Plus it makes music great fun.

★★★★★

Spendor D7.2

PRICE: £4,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 456

A crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander at this price. There's more space around vocals and a lighter more spry sound to cymbals, making for a lifelike sound despite its ability to remain smooth and sophisticated. The D7.2 is a modestly sized, highly capable, do-it-all loudspeaker that's well worth an audition.

★★★★★

Wharfedale Diamond 12.3

PRICE: £500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 491

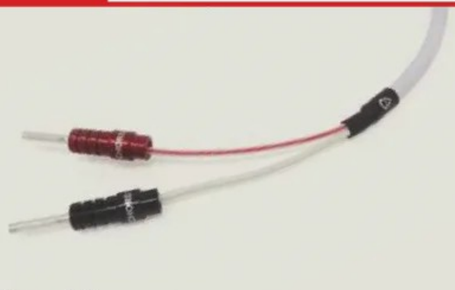
This *Group Test*-winning floorstander has skills that mark it out as something special. And first of these is the midrange, which is wide and airy. This is accompanied by some next-level transparency, spooky insight and extraordinary tonal temperance. Completing the picture are the supremely supple bass and glorious build quality.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

Chord Company
Epic XL
£600 1.5m, terminated *HFC* 450
Combining elements of Chord's Signature Reference/XL with its Epic speaker cable, the XL bristles with energy and brings fantastic detail to the fore. Subtle elements are captivatingly clear, soundstage depth is enormous and clarity is supremely enhanced.

★★★★★



Chord Company
Odyssey X
£150 1m, terminated *HFC* 451
Made from the same materials as the Rumour X (*HFC* 447), the Odyssey X is designed to bring more control to dynamics and definition, and boy does it deliver. Front-to-back imaging is superb, instruments are well focused and clearly positioned while piano is full and rich.

★★★★★

QED
XT25
£85 3m *HFC* 434
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.

★★★★★

True Colours Industries
Storm
£22 1m *HFC* 453
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins
607 S2 Anniversary

PRICE: £450 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 470

More than just a range refresh, this baby box has had new life breathed into it in a rather skilful and expert way. So much more than the sum of its parts, the 607 S2 Anniversary Edition is highly engaging across all types of music, has a super classy treble and is the best B&W entry-level standmount yet.

★★★★★

Fyne Audio
F1-8

PRICE: £6,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

If the F1-8 is anything to go by, size really does matter. If you're short of space, look elsewhere as this is a beast that won't melt into the background. But as a speaker that merges the strengths of the best standmounts and floorstanders, it is dynamic, dextrous and deeply satisfying with all types of music.

★★★★★

Q Acoustics
Concept 30

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

The Concept 30 is magnificently free of issues, places no great demand on partnering equipment and is unfussy about positioning. Combined with great looks, it is one of the very best standmounts available at the £1,000 pricepoint. Regardless of what you play on it, it's very hard to unsettle. Superb.

★★★★★

Sonus faber
Lumina I

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

A worthy entry point into the Sonus faber family and a genuine star in its own right, the Lumina I manages to sound bigger, more self-assured and room filling than you'd expect from looking at it. It does all this while still delivering on the virtues expected from the company and looking and feeling very pleasant at the same time.

★★★★★

Spendor
Classic 3/1

PRICE: £2,730 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

The Spendor Classic may not be as modern looking as some rivals at the price, but don't be fooled: that traditional design hides a superbly talented standmount able to produce a sensational blend of accuracy, scale, refinement and sheer unadulterated fun, and it's not too fussy about placement.

★★★★★

Triangle
Borea BRO3

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 489

This *Group Test*-winning speaker takes all the ingrediants of an affordable standmount and makes something rather special from them. It presents music in a spacious and believable soundstage while giving weight and texture to the instruments. Its mix of energy and refinement is very hard to resist.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER SUPPORTS

Atacama Audio
Apollo Cyclone 6
£100 ***HFC* 455**
Available in a choice of three sizes so you can get the height of your cabinets correctly positioned to suit your listening position, this stand removes unwanted vibrations from the performance sharpening imaging and instrument focus for a full, refined sound.

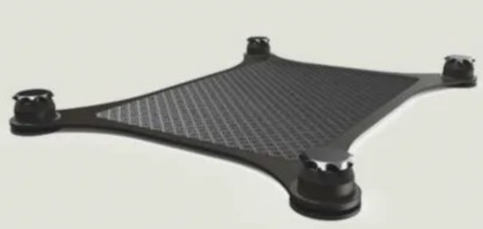
★★★★★

Hi-Fi Racks
X50
From £180.48 ***HFC* 453**
Solidly built, these elegant yet classy speaker stands are available in a choice of flexible customisation options, removing all colouration from the performance and giving the impression the cabinet is floating in mid-air. Great value for money and a simple upgrade.

★★★★★

IsoAcoustics
GAIA II
£300 ***HFC* 427**
Attaching the GAIA II feet to the underside of your speaker provides a high degree of isolation that gives it the opportunity to breath and display a level of clarity and openness that's easy to hear. Music just sounds right with them in place and the price is right too.

★★★★★



Townshend Audio
Seismic Isolation Podium
From £1,400 ***HFC* 426**
Placing your loudspeaker on to a Seismic Isolation Podium is a revelation. The way it completely removes its interaction with its surroundings is mind blowing, bringing clarity to the entire frequency range, enabling it to communicate far more effectively.

★★★★★

WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins
Formation Duo

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

It might offer relatively poor connectivity without the Formation Audio hub (an extra £650), but otherwise this is one of the best wireless speakers around thanks to its stunning design and class-leading sound which reveals impressive levels of power and poise under pressure regardless of source.

★★★★★

Cabasse
Pearl Akoya

PRICE: £2,950 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

Bringing a retro futuristic touch of glamour to the wireless world, the Pearl Akoya is sold as a single speaker only – so doesn't come cheap. HDMI aside, it ticks most boxes connectivity-wise and its crisp, expansive sound ensures it will prove more than capable for audiophiles. Superlative space-age stereo at its best.

★★★★★

KEF
LS50 Wireless II

PRICE: £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

Combining an extensive and highly practical specification that makes it an ideal one-stop shop with a level of overall performance that is truly outstanding, the LS50 Wireless II might not be cheap, but it is unquestionably a quite superb all-in-one solution that images better than most rivals and is sonically fabulous.

★★★★½

KEF
LSX

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

It might not offer the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless, but the LSX is cut from the same sonic cloth. Size, style, flexibility and sound quality all impress, but it's the active ingredient which enables a performance that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match that wins the day.

★★★★★

Q Acoustics
Q Active 200

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 488

With each cabinet boasting a pair of Balanced Mode Radiators – each with its own DSP and amplifier channel – this *Group Test*-winning standmount has a hi-fi like sound that's tonally neutral, smooth and well balanced. Offering a combination of great sonics, stylish design and superb connectivity, it's the one to beat.

★★★★★

System Audio
Legend 7.2 Silverback

PRICE: £1,700 each **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 494

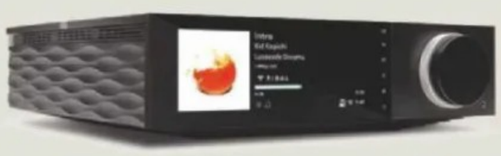
Perfect for those that are short on space, this wallmount dispels the myth that because it's not a standmount or floorstander it's not up to scratch. There's superb solidity to the sound that permits great dynamic freedom, impressive bass and everything from the mids upwards is open and lucid.

★★★★★

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS

Audiolab
Omnia
£1,600 *HFC* 490
Despite some operational foibles, the Omnia offers a level of performance that very little under £2,000 can get anywhere near. It combines excellent functionality and spec with a supreme level of performance across its wide spread of connections.

★★★★★



Cambridge Audio
Evo 150
£2,250 *HFC* 477
In terms of functionality, the Evo 150 offers little over a dedicated streaming amp such as Hegel's H95. As an object of desire, however, it's on a different plane – as lovely to look at as it is to use and to listen to. There will be many takers for it.

★★★★★

NAD
M10
£2,200 *HFC* 451
With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is a supremely stylish offering. Sonically it's a very powerful and refined system while its definition and precision is in ample supply.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Star
£3,500 *HFC* 433
Fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality, the Uniti Star might not have the forensic detail resolution of some similarly priced rivals, but it isn't far off. Otherwise it's practically impossible to find fault at the price.

★★★★★

TURNTABLES

AVID
Volvere SP

PRICE: From £5,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 472

With its dynamic, detailed and confident presentation, the Volvere SP delivers all of the thrills hidden in your vinyl's grooves and adds a few more just for good measure. Rock solid, unerringly precise and gloriously natural, it's a triumph that combines the joys of a belt drive with the accuracy of a direct drive.

★★★★★

Linn
Majik LP12/Krane

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

For such an old design, this *Group Test* winner sounds surprisingly modern. It's not as soft and rounded as it used to be, but still retains enough of the traditional Sondek character for it to charm listeners. The result is a big, confident and enjoyable sound that's tonally a little warm but with high levels of technical virtuosity.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Debut PRO

PRICE: £700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 487

Easy to setup and uncomplicated to use, the Debut PRO has been dubbed the most audiophile Debut yet. With its newly designed tonearm, TPE-damped metal feet and 1.6kg platter, it's difficult to disagree. With plenty of room to upgrade, even in stock form, this is among the very best at the sub-£1,000 price.

★★★★★

Rega
Planar 10

PRICE: £4,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

A masterpiece that is without doubt one of Rega's finest achievements, the Planar 10 manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at this lofty price point. Utterly unflappable, it offers incredible detail retrieval combined with a naturally low noise floor to dish up captivating vinyl execution.

★★★★★

Roksan
Attessa

PRICE: £995 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 493

This all-in-one package includes (an admittedly overly fiddly) tonearm, Dana cartridge and phono preamp (which can be switched off). Sonically, the Attessa is distinguished by its vast soundstage and engaging musicality. Throw in its massive recorded acoustic and supreme midband, and you've got an ideal starter option.

★★★★★

Technics
SL-1500C

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

The built-in phono stage is terrific, while the take-no-prisoners sonic personality sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. Thanks to its legendary torque and stability, it locks down timing and rhythm with start-stop precision and its firm, deep and expressive bass adds unrivalled impetus and authority.

★★★★★

CARTRIDGES

Audio-Technica
AT-OC9XEN
£300 *HFC* 452
This *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cart utilises an elliptical nude stylus mated to an assembly using two coils rather than one – which is something of an A-T trademark – and balances excellent performance with a useful boost to user friendliness, thanks to its threaded body.

★★★★★

Goldring
Eroica HX
£550 *HFC* 492
Replacing the H as the only high-output moving-coil in Goldring's range, the Eroica HX can work into a standard moving-magnet input. The result is a cart that though fiddly to fit rewards with a spacious and convincing soundstage with impeccable control and flow.

★★★★★

Hana
Umami Red
£3,400 *HFC* 483
Translating from Japanese as 'brilliant'' and 'gorgeous', this *Group Test*-winning low-output moving-coil cart more than lives up to its name. It sounds beautiful with a superb combination of power, poise, musicality, detail and insight, and makes music sound utterly magical.

★★★★★

MoFi
UltraGold
£1,500 *HFC* 485
This good-looking medium-output moving-coil cartridge from the US record label retains the warmth and air we've come to expect of MC offerings, but partners it with the sort of impressive trackability you'll struggle to match at the price. A real smooth operator.

★★★★★

PHONO STAGES

Chord Electronics
Huei

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 459

The Huei's appeal extends from its rock-solid build and playful, sphere-based control system to its impressive knack of extracting the best from a turntable/cartridge combo without being too painfully honest about the ropier aspects of less-than-pristine recordings.

★★★★★

Hegel
V10

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

It might be fiddly to setup and ensuring you pick the best combination of DIP switches for your cartridge isn't the most of intuitive of processes, but the V10 is effortlessly smooth, gloriously insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance with a wide range of different MM or MC pick-ups.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
ZEN Phono

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 495

An astonishing performance and superb flexibility. Until you find yourself at the price where features like adjustable loading and capacitance are possible, the spec for the asking price is outstanding. This is one of a tiny number of designs anywhere near this price that can do justice to pretty much any cartridge under £500.

★★★★★

Musical Fidelity
M6x Vinyl

PRICE: £1,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

This multi-talented design offers a superb combination of excellent connectivity, versatile loading and gain options, a great user interface and excellent sound. Tonally it's very neutral with a crisp clean and spacious tone that's less euphonic than some may like, but nonetheless fun to listen to.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Phono Box RS2

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

The RS2's transparency is genuinely impressive, even judged at the price and its lack of colouration is potentially very useful indeed. This is the product you buy when you're already satisfied with the tonal balance of your system and simply need a well-specified phono stage to complete it.

★★★★★

Tom Evans
MicroGroove+ X mkII

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

The closest thing the UK has to a phono stage guru, Evans designed the circuit for this stunning stage in 1989. Unapologetically plain, light and unassuming, the MicroGroove cuts the sonic mustard like nothing else to make even mid-priced turntables sound far higher end than they actually are. Superb.

★★★★★

IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Audeze
LCDi3
£900 *HFC* 478
Clarity, subtlety and coherence meet scale, air and an utterly compelling sense of dynamic freedom on this stunning *Group Test*-winning planar magnetic in-ear. With great poise and even handedness, it never gives the impression of trying too hard.

★★★★★

Audio-Technica
ATH-CKS50TW
£150 *HFC* 4901
This chunky *Group Test*-winning wireless noise canceller boasts a 15-hour battery (20 with ANC turned off), aptX, aptX Adaptive and AAC processing as well as Sony's 360 spatial audio format. Excellent value, it provides a supremely spacious and well-balanced performance.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
IE 900
£1,100 *HFC* 478
If dynamic dexterity and resolution that would shame a spy satellite are what you crave, the IE 900 scours the noise floor like few other in-ear offerings at the price. Articulation, separation and drive are equally impressive while treble extension and refinement are superb.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
PI7
£349 *HFC* 478
The first pair of True wireless in-ears from B&W does a supreme job of capturing fine details and stitching them into a wider whole. Bass extension is deep without being at the expense of speed and noise cancelling works without effecting the tonal balance.

★★★★★

HEADPHONES

Audio-Technica
ATH-M50xBT

PRICE: £180 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Taking its M50x and turning it into a very capable wireless design (thanks to Bluetooth v5.0) without altering its sonic character, Audio-Technica has come up trumps here. Balance and refinement join crunching bass, impressive three dimensionality and decent noise-cancelling to seal the deal.

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY

Bowers & Wilkins
Px8

PRICE: £600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 500

B&W doesn't put a foot wrong with this *Group Test*-winning over-ear. Featuring a tantalising combination of attractive design and comfort for long-term listening, the sound quality is an absolute delight. Capping the overall performance are impressive connectivity options and supreme noise cancelling.

★★★★★

Focal
Utopia (2022)

PRICE: £4,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 496

With its fast, open and transparent sound, the 2022 update is equally adept with high-quality recordings as it is with less pristine material, and the new design is wonderfully comfortable. Though not drastically altered from the original Utopia, this is just about the best all-round headphone on the planet right now at the price.

★★★★★

Philips
Fidelio L3

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

This wireless noise-cancelling headphone *Group Test* winner ticks pretty much every box at the price. Boasting aptX HD, a 38 hour battery and decent noise cancelling, it is well built and comfortable. And while the app makes operation a doddle, the music just flows in an easy going, unforced way.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
Momentum 4 Wireless

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 495

Its 42mm dynamic drivers may be the same as its predecessor, but the Momentum 4 has updated Bluetooth and battery, ensuring that regardless of wired or wireless use its sound quality, versatility and noise-cancelling are superb.

★★★★★

T+A
Solitaire P-SE

PRICE: £3,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

Shaving as much as 40 percent off the price of its flagship P headphone, while retaining more than 60 percent of the capability, this is a stunning open-back, planar magnetic T+A offering. It might be expensive, but the sheer levels of performance and the quality of the build and design mean it is one of the best.

★★★★★

PORTABLE DACS

Chord Electronics
Hugo 2
£1,800 *HFC* 428
An essential audition, the Hugo 2 is not just a portable DAC/headphone amp, but the best hi-fi digital converter available at or near the price. Music ebbs and flows along in an organic and unforced way and it images with stunning pinpoint precision.
★★★★★

Chord Electronics
Mojo 2
£450 *HFC* 488
It might be £50 more than its predecessor, but the follow-up Mojo makes the superb original sound opaque, coloured and closed-in by comparison. Prepare to experience complex textures, limpid transparency, striking stereo and unnoticed details like never before.
★★★★★

iFi Audio
GO bar
£330 *HFC* 494
A near technically perfect example of a portable DAC, the GO bar sets new standards of for the breed with functionality for every occasion. Accurate, with a potent yet engaging sound, it partners great features with exceptional sound.
★★★★★

iFi Audio
xDSD
£400 *HFC* 439
Justifying its inclusion on sound alone, the xDSD delivers a wide variety of musical styles with admirable clarity and precision. It's engaging, lively sonics and versatile connectivity make it equally adept for mobile or desktop use and the only minor downside is its battery life.
★★★★★

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MONITOR AUDIO Gold 10 speakers, good condition £400. Rega Apollo-R CD player,

PIONEER PL12D turntable with original packaging and manual. Thorough examination and service by AN Audio, Sep 2022, £170. Leak Throughline Mk2 FM tuner, £50. Payment in cash on collection: **email: syb7241@gmail.com (Huntingdon).**

includes Nordost Solar Wind interconnect, good condition £250. Buyer collects or pays postage: **07845 395396 or email: robertwmurray19@gmail.com (Merseyside).**

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STD 305 Seventies turntable along with a sprung SME placement. I used a SME M2-9 and Ortofon 2m Bronze. Has a spare belt. The lid has been damaged in corner, pictures available. £160 including mainland UK postage: **email: TSmith1916@aol.com (Cornwall).**

QED Reference XLR 40 analogue cables (pair), 0.6m long, boxed, in very good condition. XLR-to-XLR, £40 ono. Collection only: **07814 727957 or email: adamleighpayne@yahoo.co.uk (Powys).**

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B&W DM602 speakers, good condition for age, £100 ono. Gale Mk1 speakers, good condition, £30. Marantz CD-63 CD player, VGC, £75: **07900 285364 or email: john.wright300@ntlworld.com (Norwich).**

DALI Epicon 2, only 10 months old, will sell for £3,300. First to see will buy: **email: nnewby49@hotmail.com**

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B&W DM602 loudspeakers in good condition for age, £100 ono: **07900 285364 or email: john.wright300@ntlworld.com (Norwich).**

ARCAM quality vintage A65+ amplifier (with original box) and Cd63t CD player. Both black, fully working and in exceptional condition. £80 each. Also DALI Lektor 2 bookshelf speakers, as new in original box, black ash, £110: **07884 952389 or email: jackson114@btinternet.com (Kent).**

MARANTZ CD6006 £200. Onkyo 9010B £95. Both as new black and boxed. Audio-Technica AT-OC9ML/11 50 hours' use £100: **01626 331634 or email: bjmick19@gmail.com (Devon).**

DYNAUDIO Evoke 10 compact standmount speakers in walnut. Purchased new November 2021 and in unmarked condition, boxed as supplied, £650: **01825 722936 (Sussex).**

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SME Model 10 turntable in superb condition. Tonearm not included, but I have a compatible Pro-Ject 9CC and OL Zephyr for sale too. One careful owner from new and replacement rubber suspension bands included. £2,750 ono. **07974 515518 or email: manish.solanki.uk@gmail.com (SW London).**

GOLDEN EAR Triton One.R speakers in mint condition, fully boxed. Collection only. Offers around £3,500: **0771 2593669or email: petera44@mail.com (Peterborough).**

HI-FI RACKS stands. Cost £350. For sale £100. AV stand from John Lewis. £750 new. Would take £125: **07758 602375 (Lancashire).**

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TELLURIUM Q Graphite 1.5m pair speaker cables, ex-demo purchased August 2021. Excellent condition banana/banana tighten up collars, original box £525 ono: **07432 245911 or email: christophermaynard02@gmail.com.**

THORENS TD160B Mk II SME III arm with Ortofon SME30H arm/cart. VGC with manuals. Reasonable offer accepted: **email cbchinoy@outlook.com (Sevenoaks area).**

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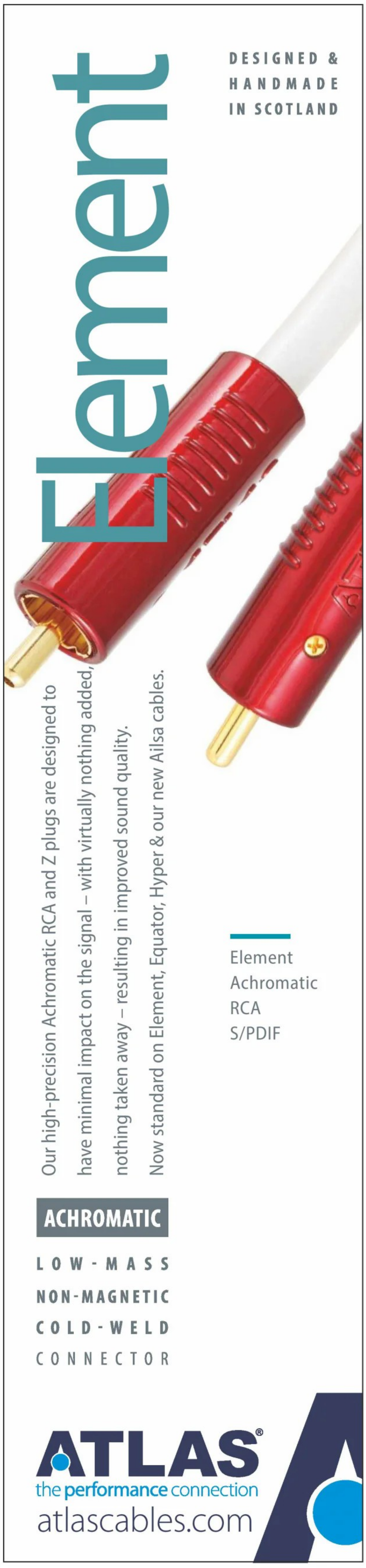

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Phone: +44 (0) 203 8556105
hifichoice.com

Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd.

AVTech media ltd

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Hi-Fi Choice, ISSN 0955-1115, is published monthly with an additional issue in July by AVTech Media Ltd, a division of MYTIMEMEDIA Ltd, Safeship Fulfilment Ltd, Unit A, Cullet Drive, Queenborough, ME11 5JS, UK. The US annual subscription price is 67GBP (equivalent to approximately 95USD). Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11431. US Postmaster: Send address changes to Hi-Fi Choice, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at CDS Global, Tower House, Lathkill Street, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9EF. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.

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"I WAS A HIGH PRIESTESS IN EGYPT"

It's May 1989 and **Steve Sutherland** is meeting up with Stevie Nicks of Fleetwood Mac who is promoting her fourth solo album – *The Other Side Of The Mirror*. Will either of them remember the encounter?

Just so you know, Ms Nicks is not at her best today." This is the lady from the record company press office, prepping me for the arrival of Ms Nicks who, in a few moments, will enter the Monte Carlo suite of the Mayfair Hotel in London where our interview is to take place. It's 5.30pm and she's an hour or so late, having overslept. She'd spent all day yesterday in lace and high heels shooting a video at some country house and now, I'm told, her feet are killing her.

Anyway, here she comes and, yeah, she does look a little blurry, a mite puffy, her hair not quite a rat's nest, her make-up so-so. She's shorter than I remember and she's clutching the dregs of a glass of iced tea. The first thing she does is goes to the sofa and puffs up all the cushions. Then she sits and pats the space next to her for me to come sit down and join her.

Considering the state she's in, I venture that calling her new album *The Other Side Of The Mirror* is quite a brave thing to do. After all, mirrors can be cruel reminders of the ravages of passing time.

"It's very interesting you say that," she says, her voice a little cracked and squeaky. "If I was an interviewer, I would think that profound. But I never think much of looking in the mirror and getting older. I guess that's because, if you look in the mirror every single day, you don't notice it so much."

She goes on to explain that the album's title is, in fact, a reference to *Alice Through The Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll's fantastical account of a young girl's twin manifestations in the real world and: "the crazy world where the caterpillars and the bugs all talk". She says she's a massive Lewis Carroll fan, that her friends say she writes like him and that she wishes she could travel back in time to meet him. Regarding her appropriation of his imagery for the name of her LP, it seems one world is Ms. Nicks' superstar membership of the phenomenally successful Fleetwood Mac, the other her existence as a solo artist in her own right.

"For me, there's probably a third part of the mirror as well," she confides. "There are a few days here and there where I paint and draw and hand-tint photographs and crochet blankets. I have my own little domestic side that nobody knows about. I make time for that.

"I have to," she says then with a theatrical sigh, a tinge of sadness appearing in her voice: "since I can't have a married life or children or any kind of life like that…"

Later I discover she was wed once, in 1983, to someone called Kim Anderson. Apparently, she married him because she was best friends with his wife who died of leukaemia. The couple had a baby and she promised to take care of him. They divorced a couple of years later. She was pregnant once too, in a relationship with Eagles' Don Henley, but decided that she couldn't be both a mother and an artist, and chose to pursue the latter path.

These days, she says, she gathers a posse around her in place of a family – wardrobe mistresses, make-up artists, people like that. She says she teaches them to paint .

I say that sounds a bit sad and not much of a substitute for a love life. Doesn't she ever think about enjoying what others might consider a more conventional relationship?

"I don't expect it unless I give up either one or other sides of the mirror," she says. "And that's something that, at this point, I don't think I could do. If somebody were to walk into my life that I instantly fell in love with and I decided it was important enough, then I would probably give up one, but…"

She hesitates. "I haven't ruled it out, let's put it that way. I've had many wonderful relationships with many wonderful men so it's not like I've missed out on love because I haven't. I wouldn't have been able to write the songs that I have if that was the case.

"My relationships usually go on for two or three years. I don't date. But then, y'know, I see that sad look in their eyes where they're realising that it's a lost cause. I've gone with some men that have been, as far as I'm concerned, absolute saints because I wouldn't take it. Y'know, if I were them, I'd say: 'I'm tired of being number eight on your priority list'."

I wonder if she ever gets lonely and that's why so many of her songs seem to exist in a kind of fairytale, fantasy world?

"Well, let's put it this way, I'm used to it. I have a lot of people around me all the time because, as a woman, I just can't travel around by myself. I wouldn't go out at all if I was alone because I'd be afraid to go out late in the night, travelling around to clubs by myself."

She yearns to go sightseeing, hand-in-hand with a beau, stopping to take pictures, but she never has the time.

"I'm always late for something," she says. "It's like: 'You're late! You're late, for a very important date, Alice!'"

Picture credits: Modern Records

Talking of Alice, the *…In Wonderland* and *…Through The Looking Glass* books have been thoroughly strip-mined by musicians, mostly for the drug references ala Jefferson Airplane's *White Rabbit*. Ms Nicks has had her own well-publicised problems with cocaine in the past and has done a stint in rehab at the Betty Ford Clinic where they showed her a film she's never forgotten about sclerosis of the liver. They also asked her to: "do the impossible" and write an essay describing the difference between Stevie Nicks The Star and Stephanie Nicks

"I HAVE MY OWN LITTLE DOMESTIC SIDE THAT NOBODY KNOWS ABOUT"

the woman. She says they were so hard on her that she actually gave up wearing a lot of her make-up and started wearing – she shudders – "ordinary clothes!"

I'm just plucking up the courage to ask her if it's true that she used to hire people to blow cocaine up her bum when a phone on the coffee table that neither of us has previously noticed suddenly rings. She picks up the receiver and snaps: "I am doing an interview and DO NOT wish to be disturbed!"

She slams the receiver back into its cradle and bristles: "It's such a miserable bell!"

We get back to the drug stuff, and she insists it was always an aid to creativity for her, never a stimulant to her imagination, just an energy-boost that got out of hand. She insists she never even took a drug until she was 28, bar the odd slimming pill she stole from her mother while carrying out her weekly chores – which, it seems, mostly comprised of polishing bathrooms.

I've no need to ask her what she was like on drugs as I have actually met her once before. She doesn't remember, but it was at an EMI convention. I approached her for an autograph, which she graciously granted while babbling on…and on… and on, incomprehensibly, well and truly out of it.

Today she says, she considers drugs to be like Sarah Lee cheesecake: "If you leave it in your refrigerator, every time you go past you're gonna take a little piece with you and by the next day, the whole cake's gone!"

She laughs: "So I just don't ever have Sarah Lee cheesecake in my house, and if anyone brings it over, I get very upset."

She reckons she's only seen heroin once, when someone tried to trick her into taking it. "I said: 'Do you really want to be the reason that I die? Do you want to cause my death? How could you offer that to me?' I threw him out of my house and I never saw him again."

The phone rings again and Ms Nicks reacts as if she's had an electric shock. "DID I NOT SAY…." She yells at me, "THAT I DO NOT WISH TO BE DISTURBED?"

She picks up the receiver and slams it back down with a vengeance. There's a frosty silence and to break the ice I ask, as you do, if she believes in reincarnation?

"Absolutely!" she says. "I know I've been here in my other lives. I know I was in Germany and went through some of the atrocities. I know I experienced it. Every time I go to Germany, I feel it. I've also been told that I was a high priestess in Egypt many, many years ago and I believe that because… I dunno… because sometimes I flash on that, living up on a stone kinda thing and meeting up with people. I'm some sort of ruler. And I know I was a concert pianist because I have all the moves down – I just don't play very well!"

She laughs, then grows serious. "I think this life that I'm living right now is my last. To have been through being in one of the biggest bands in rock 'n' roll history, to come through the entire drug thing… I wouldn't say unscathed…" She laughs: "…But I have come through… to still be writing, to be going very quickly with my art… if I live another 40 years, which I absolutely will, it seems that I will have just about completed everything that I can complete here on this particular plane."

She sips at the dregs of her tea. "I had a dream once. I was very upset – this was before I stopped doing drugs of any kind. I had a very bad experience of thinking: 'I wonder if after you die you're still able to write?' Or, y'know, whatever you like to do – hang-glide or dance or whatever. And that night I had a dream and I saw myself sitting at a beautiful white enamel carved desk, writing – hand writing, not typing – with a really beautiful pen with a white feather quill which was really long… it went way back over my shoulder. And there were clouds coming in and out and I was just floating. And I looked up and I smiled and that smile said: 'You don't have anything to worry about. This will go on once you leave this particular plane of life'. Y'know, that's what always scared me the most about dying – that I wouldn't be able to be creative anymore" ●

AFTERMATH…

Ms Nicks has subsequently said she has no memory whatsoever of being in Europe at the time of this interview as she was addicted to Klonopin, prescribed by a psychiatrist in an attempt to keep her from regressing to her former abuse of cocaine. She successfully detoxed, got herself back together and has subsequently been inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame twice, first as a member of Fleetwood Mac in 1998 and then as a solo artist in 2019. *Bella Donna Live 1981* was released on Record Store Day 2023 as a double 180g LP limited to 14,000 copies.

1 BE SPHERE NOW

Coldplay have arranged a special worldwide cinema presentation of their *Music Of The Spheres* world tour concert, which was filmed during their sold-out, 10-night run at Buenos Aires' River Plate stadium at the end of last year

Coldplay – Music Of The Spheres: Live At River Plate is the director's cut of October's worldwide live broadcast of the show, featuring remixed and remastered sound and visuals plus a ton of footage not shown during the live broadcast. The cinema presentation will also include a behind-the-scenes short film and new interviews with the band. You'll need to get your skates on as it's being shown on 19 & 23 April. Tickets are available from: coldplaycinema.live

REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Exciting things coming your way in the month ahead

2 POP IDOL

Iggy Pop has created a new mini-documentary featuring an in-depth conversation with Red Hot Chili Peppers' bassist Flea. The 26-minute film, called *Bitten By Flea!,* sees the two musicians sit down together to talk about a range of topics including The Stooges' influence on Flea, their experiences working with producer Andrew Watt on his new LP *Every Loser* and footage from the album recording sessions. You can watch it on Youtube now.

3 STANDS THAT DELIVER

Sanus is releasing height-adjustable and fixed-height speaker stands and wall mounts for the new Sonos Era 100 and Era 300 wireless speakers. The new selection of stands and wall mounts is available in singles or pairs and comes in a choice of white or black to match the colour options of the updated Sonos speaker cabinets.

All incorporate integrated cable management and the company claims they're: "easily assembled in just 15 minutes with a screwdriver".

BLACK RHODIUM'S GRAHAM NALTY HAS A NEW BOOK ABOUT CABLES...

4 CULTURE CLUB

Qobuz Club is a new interactive forum just launched to enable Qobuz users to convene with like-minded listeners on topics such as music discovery and recommendations, hardware and hi-fi advice. The company says: "While algorithms and AI can help with personalised recommendations, they lack the emotional and social context that makes discovering new music in a community setting quite so exhilarating".

Sections include Qobuz News, Music Clubs, Hi-Fi Spaces and a Discussion Forum where members can talk directly with the Qobuz teams. The platform also has a collector's corner for vinyl lovers; a beta testers space; and a help-and-suggestions area for future app improvements.

The Qobuz Club is open to all Qobuz account holders, with no paid subscription needed. The platform is available on the web and will soon be accessible via the mobile app.

You can join in the fun at: community.qobuz.com

5 SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

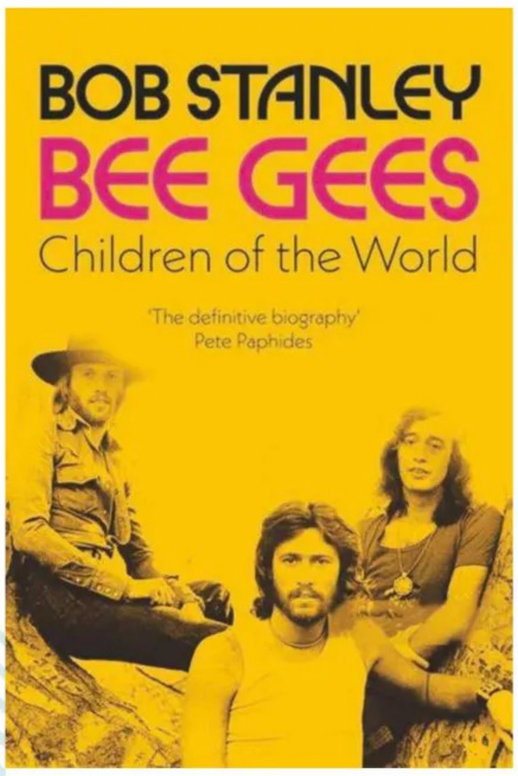
Spotify has announced major changes to its app design, including new vertical video feeds and a built-in pre-save button. Instead of a static carousel of playlists and recommendations, users will now be shown feeds of visual and audio previews of playlists, albums, podcast episodes and audiobooks in an endless feed of vertical video. The previews are also integrated into the search function.

Additionally, a pre-save feature – long utilised by artists through various third-party apps to gather data and contact information on the people excited about their music – will

Picture credits: Marcus Haney (Coldplay) and Steve Rapport (Paul Weller)

now be baked directly into the Spotify user app.

SoundCloud has also announced it is testing a "TikTok-like" vertical video feed for music discovery. Like Spotify's, it will serve up music based on your listening history and musical taste, but SoundCloud will go one further by displaying a line explaining the reason why a particular song is showing up in your recommendations.



6 SATURDAY NIGHT READER

Bee Gees: Children Of The World is a new book by St Etienne's Bob Stanley. Published by Nine Eight Books in hardback, audio and eBook in June, it covers the whole illustrious career of the Gibb Brothers. "For me," says Mr Stanley: " the Bee Gees' story has the drama of Fleetwood Mac and their music has the emotional heft of the Beach Boys. I wanted to write *Children Of The World* to explain how deeply strange, unique and important the Bee Gees really are."

7 BACK IN BLACK

Cambridge Audio, is releasing a limited Black Edition of its CX Series 2. The company says: "A marriage of understated class and head-turning brilliance, the Black Edition boasts a stylish aluminium front plate in a matte black finish combined with shimmering black gloss spot 'CX BLACK EDITION' lettering. The dual texture effect means that they stand out even from standard black separates."

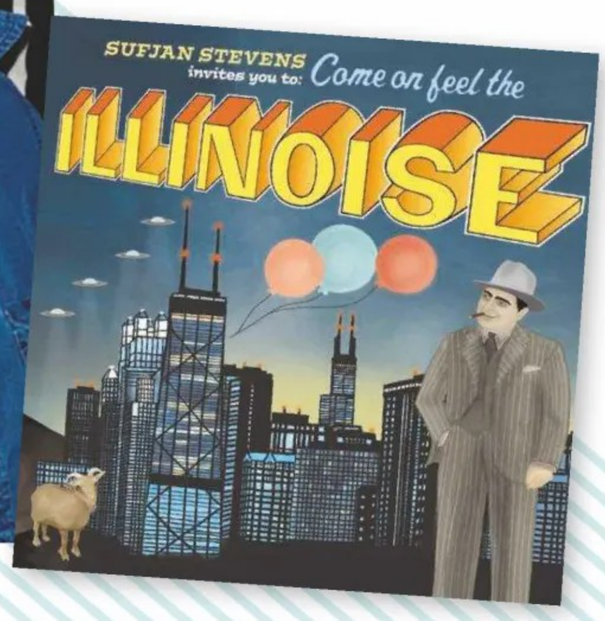
Only 1,000 units of each component will be available worldwide and each purchase comes with a certificate of authenticity from Cambridge Audio. They're priced the same as the original Lunar Grey editions, which continue as standard.

8 MAGIC MOD

Magic: A Journal Of Song, is a new book about and by, Paul Weller in cahoots with author Dylan Jones. Covering the Modfather's career from founding The Jam and creating The Style Council, through to his years as a solo musician, *Magic* cover's Weller's personally curated selection of 120 songs spanning his entire musical career. Illustrated with 450 or so photographs and items of memorabilia, the hardback is on sale now with a special limited edition available next month from: wellerbook.com.

9 COME ON, FEEL THE ILLINOISE

Please, please, please, please, please make this happen here. Sufjan Stevens' *Illinoise* is getting a musical theatre adaptation, announced as part of the performing arts series at Bard College's Fisher Centre in New York state. Justin Peck, who choreographed Stephen Spielberg's *West Side Story* update, is directing and choreographing the show, which runs for a few dates in late June and early July. *Illinois* is also slated for an as-yet unannounced run in Chicago later in the summer.



QOBUZ CLUB IS A NEW FORUM FOR LIKE-MINDED MUSIC FANS

10 PHONES BONUS

Sony has announced a firmware update bringing Multipoint Bluetooth connectivity to its WF-1000XM4 headphones. The company says users: "will be able to connect to two devices at the same time. For example, if you are playing music on your PC and your smartphone receives an incoming call, it will automatically switch to the smartphone's call so you can make that hands-free call without having to switch connections."

11 READY WILLING AND CABLE

The founder of Black Rhodium, Graham Nalty, has published a book entitled *All Audio Cables Obey The Laws of Physics*. This is a culmination of his many years of design experience in the industry. From his research into the design of audio cables over many years, he notes that the laws of physics explain why you can hear differences in quality between audio cables. Nalty has used his findings to develop engineering solutions to minimise the negative influences on the delicate electrical signals that deliver music from source to speakers.

The book discusses the way that cables can contribute to the sound of your system. Nalty explains how the laws of physics have shaped his approach to cable design. Section headings include: Twisting Your Stereo Cables Makes Your Music Clearer, Cables Sound Better When Their Conductors Are Apart and All Cable Distortion Can Be Explained By The Laws Of Physics. Yours for £12 from: black-rhodium.co.uk.

Next Month

HIFI ROSE RS250A:
THE COMPLETE HI-FI NETWORK STREAMER/DAC/PREAMP?

Our reviewer reckons: "the core functionality of the HiFi Rose is so well sorted that it can be judged as a sober and carefully engineered network streamer and be absolutely competitive with anything at the price. It then goes on to add enough surprise features to be something altogether more special."
Read more about it next month...

ALSO:

REVIEWS Q Acoustics 5020 bookshelf speakers, Sennheiser HD 660S2 headphones, Sumiko Blue Point No. 3 cartridge, Vertere PHONO-1 MkII L phono stage, Mitchell Acoustics' uStream Go! wireless system, NAD C 3050 LE amp and a wireless speaker *Group Test*

FEATURES *Music Legends*, *Music Reviews*, Reasons To Be Cheerful, our comprehensive *Buyer's Guide* and sharp-as-nails *Opinions* pieces, the *Flashback* interview, *Beginner's Guide* all the latest kit release news in *Audiofile* and your hi-fi queries answered by our experts.

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WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2022 — BEST ANALOGUE INTERCONNECT UNDER £100 — Chord Company C-line

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2022 — BEST ANALOGUE INTERCONNECT OVER £100 — Chord Company Clearway Analogue RCA

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Hi-Fi Choice GROUPTEST WINNER

hi-fi+ WINNER 2022 — SignatureXL speaker cable

hi-fi+ HIGHLY COMMENDED 2022 — SignatureX power cable

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